THE Hudson REVIEW

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The Bewildered Equilibrist

BERT O. STATES:
Phenomenology of the Curtain Call

MARCIA B. SIEGEL:
The Year Push Came to Shove

JAMES FINN COTTER:
The Philadelphia Story

LYSANDER KEMP:
The Sunday Morning Wheelbarrow

Poems by DANA GIOIA, GRACE SCHULMAN, ALICIA OSTRIKER, RICHARD COLE, LUCILLE DAY, KATHRYN STRIPLING, DAVID BROMWICH, ALISON TURNER.

Reviews by DAVID KUBAL, MARVIN MUDRICK, HAMBERLIN, GEORGE CORE, WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD ON YOUNG, ROBERT PHILLIPS, CHARLES W. MILLARD

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LYSANDER KEMP

The Sunday Morning Wheelbarrow

(Excerpts from unpublished letters between Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams)

WS to WCW: And, herewith, the most recent draft of what I have decided to call "Sunday Morning." In the first stanza, I believe I shall alter "wrapper" to "peignoir"—you know (and deplore) my predilection of the snazzier word. In the same stanza, the line "And the suave snoring of a Pekingese" dissatisfies me. I am quite as fond as need be of my wife's little Foufou, but I sense here a demand for more color, and am steeled to kicking Foufou out of the poem on her plumey behind. Would "And the green freedom of a cockatoo" represent an improvement? (If so, "bright brown fur" in line 9 should become "bright green wings.") Presently, I hope, I shall send you the final lines of the final stanza. They are causing me acute attacks of what your patients call heartburn and I call perturbation.

WCW to WS: *Never saw a green cockatoo. Cockatoos are pink. Glad* you mean to get rid of that Foufou. Still have small scab on left ankle. Two pints of chloroform in dispensary if needed. Poem very good, really, one of yr. best. Looking forward to last lines.

WS to WCW: After ingesting large draughts of Bromo-Seltzer for my perturbation, I have produced, tentatively, the following conclusion for "Sunday Morning":

> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And here at home, near to our hearths and hearts,
> So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow
> Glazed with rainwater among the white chickens
> That we are at once domestic, wild, and glad.

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What I intend, of course, is to hark back, obliquely, to the felicitous domesticity evoked at the outset, but I feel that wheelbarrows and chickens are deficiently evocative of peignoirs and cockatoos. Have you a remedy, Doctor, in your little black bag?

WCW to WS: Never saw a red wheelbarrow. Wheelbarrows are green. I mean barnyard wheelbarrows. Saw a blue one in Nantucket once, but it was a frontyard wheelbarrow. Petunias in it. About deer walking upon our mountains, more likely running for their lives. No deer around Paterson. Few if any quail. Lots of starlings, though, esp. out here. Downtown, pigeons galore. Why "among" the white chickens? Accurate, but better "beside." Chickens are always everywhere, never stay still, esp. those white leghorns. You want a still life, not a mob scene. But question whole barnyard business, same reason you do. Suggest filling out stanza with the wild berries. No wild berries around Paterson that I know of. Treated a patient for beri-beri once, not the same thing. Joke.

WS to WCW *(telegram)*: PIGEONS COMMA OF COURSE EXCLAMATION POINT PROFOUNDLY OBLIGED COMMA MON CHER GUILLAUME STOP WHOOPEE SEVERAL EXCLAMATION POINTS

WCW to WS *(telegram)*: PIGEONS OF COURSE WHOOPEE MY AUNT MILDREDS LEFT FOOT EXPLAIN

WCW to WS *(postcard)*: Got yr. wire, hope you got mine. You win on cockatoo, patient came in yesterday with large green same. Chronic hiccups or something. Referred case to vet, hear he's sober this week. Now come clean on them pigeons.

WS to WCW: Like my wife's Foufou (who is under a cloud for having peed yet again on my Persian carpet), all of what you described as the "barnyard business" is definitively out of the poem. So the wheelbarrow is all yours if you want it, though I rather regret the loss of "glazed with rainwater," a phrase I fancy despite the redundancy of "water," which I added for the meter—the pentameter meter, not the water meter. As you would say, a joke. No doubt you are right that the usual farm wheelbarrow is green, but I distinctly observed a number of red wheelbarrows last October while admiring the autumnal foliage in Vermont. Presumably they have the paint left over after painting their barns for Norman Rockwell.

WCW to WS *(telegram)*: FORGET WHEELBARROWS EXPLAIN WHOOPEE PIGEONS

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WS to WCW: As for your consuming interest in pigeons, what I intended to convey by "Pigeons, of course!" is that said birds are, on the one hand, less wild than the quail previously evoked and, on the other, less domesticated than the now-banished white leghorns. Indeed, their status resembles that of the cockatoo, neither totally wild nor totally tame. Hence, in a sense, the final lines of the final stanza allude to the initial lines of the initial stanza:

> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

I do hope you are pleased with them. I have persuaded myself that I am.

WCW to WS: New lines hot stuff, as they say, esp. "ambiguous undulations." Know a woman who walks like that, happily married however. Why "extended wings"? How else could they fly? No. No, I see. Stupid question. Forgive remark about undulations. They sink into darkness gliding downward. Wings not flapping, extended. Beautiful. Whole stanza, whole poem, good as you've done. Good as anybody's done. Mean it, Wallace. By the way, thanks for that red wheelbarrow. Might be able to use it.

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DANA GIOIA

An Elegy for Vladimir de Pachmann

(Odessa, 1848—Rome, 1933)

"How absurd," cried the pianist de Pachmann
to reporters from the *Minneapolis Dispatch,*
"that my talents or the talents of a Liszt
were confined to so small a planet
as the earth. How much more could we have done
given the dimensions of a fixed star?"
He began a *Prelude* quietly, then stopped.
"Once Chopin could play this well. Now only me."

When he brought his socks into the concert hall
and dedicated that night's music to them,
or relearned his repertoire at sixty-nine
using only the fourth and fifth fingers
of one hand, the critics thought his madness
was theatrical, but the less learned
members of his audience, to whom he talked
while playing, knew the truth.

Porters and impresarios told of coming on him,
alone in a hotel suite, his back
curved like a monkey's, dancing and screeching
in front of a dressing mirror,
or giving concerts for the velvet furniture
in his room, knocking it together afterwards
for applause. "Dear friends," he whispered to it,
"Such love deserves an encore."

Now relegated to three short paragraphs
in *Grove's Dictionary of Music*
and one out-of-stock recording of Chopin,
he reappears only by schedule

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in a few selections broadcast on his birthday,
music produced by rolls on a mechanical piano
where no fingers touch the keys as each piece
goes to its predictable finale.

God Only Knows

Here is the church,
Here is the steeple,
Open it up,
And see all the people.

God only knows

if Bach's greatest work
was just an improvised
accompaniment
between two verses of a hymn,
one that stopped the Burghers
squirming in their pews
and made them not only
listen to the organ in the loft
but actually hear the roof
unbend itself
and leave the church wide
open to a terrifying sky
which he had filled with angels
holding ledgers
for a roll call of the damned,
whom they would have named,
had not the congregation
started up the final chorus
and sung

to save their souls.

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Lives of the Great Composers

Herr Bruckner often wandered into church
to join the mourners at a funeral.
The relatives of Berlioz were horrified.
"Such harmony," quoth Shakespeare, "is in
immortal souls . . . We cannot hear it." But
the radio is playing, and outside
rain splashes to the pavement. Now and then
the broadcast fails. On nights like these Schumann
would watch the lightning streak his windowpanes.

Outside the rain is falling on the pavement.
A scrap of paper tumbles down the street.
On rainy evenings Schumann jotted down
his melodies on windowpanes. "Such harmony!
We cannot hear it." The radio goes off and on.
At the rehearsal Gustav Holst exclaimed,
"I'm sick of music, especially my own!"
The relatives of Berlioz were horrified.
Haydn's wife used music to line pastry pans.

On rainy nights the ghost of Mendelssohn
brought melodies for Schumann to compose.
"Such harmony is in immortal souls . . .
We cannot hear it." One could suppose
Herr Bruckner would have smiled. At Tergensee
the peasants stood to hear young Paganini play,
but here there's lightning, and the thunder rolls.
The radio goes off and on. The rain
falls to the pavement like applause.

A scrap of paper tumbles down the street.
On rainy evenings Schumann would look out
and scribble on the windows of his cell.
"Such harmony." Cars splash out in the rain.
The relatives of Berlioz were horrified

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to see the horses break from the cortège
and gallop with his casket to the grave.
Liszt wept to hear young Paganini play.
Haydn's wife used music to line pastry pans.

Photograph of My Mother as a Young Girl

She wasn't looking
when they took this picture:
sitting on the grass
in her bare feet
wearing a cotton dress,
she stares off to the side
watching something on the lawn
the camera didn't catch.
What was it?
A ladybug? A flower?
Judging from her expression,
possibly nothing at all,
or else
the lawn was like a mirror,
and she sat watching herself,
wondering who she was
and how she came to be there
sitting in this backyard,
wearing a cheap, white dress
imagining that tomorrow
would be like all her yesterdays,
while her parents chatted
and watched, as I do
years later,
too distantly to interfere.

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View from the Second Story

There were no colors in the sunset.
Rain had been coming down for hours,
and the winter sky was a bright grey
against the windowpanes. Lights were coming on
in all the other houses, but here
only weak sunlight from the rain-streaked glass
dissolving in the shadows of the furniture.
How easily the room comes back again.
I can still feel the cold, still hear the cars
streaking down the rainy avenues below us.
You are in the bedroom, sleeping, or crying.
I don't know which. Am I afraid to look?
And I am still standing at the wide window
looking for something beyond the dark rows
of winter trees and houses, feeling the cold air
that somehow finds its way between the cracks
of any windowsill, and I am waiting
listening to the rain while the air which seemed
invisible turns gradually to black.

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GILBERTO PEREZ

The Bewildered Equilibrist: An Essay on Buster Keaton's Comedy

> Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever.
>
> —Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Wakefield"

NOTHING IN THE STRANGE WORLD of Buster Keaton's comedy is stranger than the ending of *College.* In that picture Buster plays a bookworm who strives to become a jock. The top student in his high-school class, and so averse to sports that he makes his graduation speech into a diatribe against athletics, he yet arrives at college the next fall with suitcases full not of books but of athletic equipment. With the dauntless determination characteristic of the Keaton hero, the little scholar involves himself in a pursuit for which he's quite unsuited but which is, under circumstances equally characteristic of Keaton, what's expected of him in his courtship of the girl he loves. Outraged like all his other classmates by his diatribe at graduation, she'll see no more of him, as she promptly informs him after the speech, unless he changes his attitude and takes up sports. And so he changes his attitude, neglecting all his studies at college and instead spending most of his time on the sports field. Although he seems inept beyond hope at the various athletic activities he doggedly tries out, he succeeds in winning her in the end, for he summons up unexpected abilities when she's in danger and he comes to the rescue, running much faster and jumping much farther than he ever could before, managing with no trouble now an obstacle race over the hedges in his path and a high pole-vault into the window of her room. With undiminished momentum, he quickly disposes of the villain, a brawny dolt who has been his rival for the girl's affections, and proceeds with her to church forthwith, not even pausing to change his athletic clothes before they are married. Then follows a very peculiar epilogue. No sooner are the newlyweds out of church than a dissolve transports us many years later to the middle-aged couple in

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their home, sitting among their several children; this in turn swiftly gives way to the couple in their advanced years, abidingly sitting at home beside each other, this in turn to the closing shot of their adjacent graves.

The element of sadness in Keaton's comedy has often been noted, and it certainly emerges in that brisk final depiction of aging and death. Coming on the heels of the triumphant happy ending, the sudden sadness of the epilogue takes us by surprise; but I don't think it constitutes such a break with the rest of the film as some believe. "What is this abrupt slap in the face doing at the end of an otherwise unquestioning love story?" wrote Walter Kerr in *The Silent Clowns.* "It takes no more than eleven seconds of playing time to deliver its chill, and yet it undoes on the spot all of the yearning, the struggle and the victory, of the narrative." Evidently perturbed by the chill, Kerr misrepresents the epilogue as portraying a disappointed, even embittered, couple, when nothing of the sort is suggested: all that we get is a brief summary of a long, uneventful marriage. It seems to me wrong, or only half-right, to view the epilogue as a brusque reversal of a hitherto romantic story. Although the hero is unquestioning in his devotion to the girl, the romanticism of the story has been tacitly called into question all along by the conveyed sense that the girl is as unreasonable in her peremptory demands as is the hero in his stubborn pursuit. If Keaton is a romantic, he's a singularly unsentimental one. Granted, we'd have expected the story to end with Buster's getting the girl, but the epilogue merely shows us that he gets to keep her: surely not the undoing but the exact fulfillment of his wishes. If the epilogue brings about a reversal of the happy ending, it does so by way of being a logical continuation of it, indeed a visual equivalent of those famous romantic last words: and they lived happily ever after.

Seeing the couple's whole life together go by on the screen in so short a time has, of course, none of the reassuring effect of those words. Yet even the disconcerting briskness of those final eleven seconds carries forward unbrokenly the haste of the climactic rescue and ensuing wedding, as if confirming Buster's aim to get things settled once and for all. *College* is not the only one of Keaton's films to conclude with the grave. In *Cops,* a short film he made a few years before, "The End" appears inscribed on a tombstone capped with Buster's porkpie hat. The plot of *Cops,* how-

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ever—unlike that of any of his full-length movies—has an unhappy outcome. Rejected by the girl he loves even after he manages to elude the myriad of policemen who have been chasing him, Buster suicidally puts himself back in their midst: an unusual ending for a comedy, to be sure, but not so strange as the way that in *College* the romance turns sad, in spite of its triumph, by being literally carried out to its conventional conclusion in the couple's staying together for the remainder of their lives.

"He has left the world without ever being quite in it," wrote Hugh Kenner in an obituary article on Keaton. "Only saints and a few classic madmen have put forth a comparable power to suggest that this place where we all catch trains so deftly is yet not wholly the place for which we were made." Unlike a saint or a madman, Buster proposes no defiance of the world's ways: on the contrary, he strives for a compliance with them. When in Rome, he goes to great lengths to do as the Romans do: to become an athlete if that is what the girl expects, to get married, have children, live happily ever after, if that is the prescribed happy ending. "As though dropped to this earth from some obscure cataclysm," wrote Kenner in his Keaton obituary (echoing Mallarmé's sonnet on the tomb of Edgar Poe), "he coped with this earth's systems as he could." While on earth, he tried his best to do as earthlings do, and thereby made us aware of the peculiar systems by which we rule our lives.

Although not quite in the class of Keaton's very best—*Our Hospitality, Sherlock Junior, The Navigator, The General, Steamboat Bill Jr.*—*College* seems to me a splendid film which has been generally underrated. It surpasses, I believe, Harold Lloyd's better known college comedy, *The Freshman,* which preceded it and no doubt influenced it. The hero of *The Freshman* is also an incompetent athlete who redeems himself in the end by performing unexpected feats, in his case by winning the decisive football game of the season. (Apparently to avoid too close a comparison with the Lloyd picture, football is one sport omitted from *College.*) In giving such prominence to athletics, however, both comedians were merely reflecting a fact of campus life—in which sports are often more important than studies—and making use of material naturally befitting the physical comedy of the silent screen. Their comic conceptions, in any case, are fundamentally different. For Lloyd, athletics are part of the image of the big man on campus his ambitious but un-

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knowing hero wants to become; whereas Buster only wants the girl, a more realistic goal as well as a more romantic one. Lloyd's hero is a thoroughgoing incompetent, a classic fool; whereas Keaton's is only a fool for love, a bookworm out of his element in the sports field and quite aware of his problem. When, after knocking over every other hurdle along the racing track, he succeeds in clearing the last one, Buster, instead of deriving any satisfaction from that success, gravely appraises it as a fluke, and then tips over that last hurdle too, feeling that it might as well conform to the pattern of the others. Such disdain for flukes is inconceivable in the Lloyd hero, who'd get nowhere without them. Unlike Lloyd, Keaton never plays the kind of comic character who is preposterously deluded about himself and what's going on around him.

Buster usually has a good grasp of his situation: as good a grasp as one can expect from, as Kenner put it, "a visitor, not native." He is a visitor to the sports field in *College* who knows that the odds are against him there, but who nonetheless keeps trying because he also knows that the girl won't have him any other way, because he is a compliant visitor desiring to participate in a situation in which a girl's ideal boyfriend must be a jock. The situation of being out of one's element recurs throughout Keaton's films. In *Steamboat Bill Jr.* he plays a college student from Boston who seems to have done pretty well in that environment, but whose father, a steamboat captain down South whom he goes to visit after a long separation, regards him as a sissy. Here again Buster finds himself having to cope with demands he hasn't encountered before. In *Steamboat Bill Jr.* his predicament is compounded by the coincidental presence in the Southern river town of his girlfriend from Boston, whose notions of what he should be like run exactly counter to his father's. The overriding demands of a cyclone that sweeps the town are easier for Buster to meet than those of his father and his girl, and enable him to vindicate himself in their eyes by rescuing them both from drowning. Yet it took those tempestuous circumstances for him to gain the approval they had both denied him under normal conditions. Perhaps more vividly than in any other Keaton film, we get the sense in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* that it's a difficult business to live up to what's expected of one.

As soon as he's done with the rescuing, Buster wordlessly dives back into the river, and for a moment both the father and the girl

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suppose, to their chagrin, that he wants no more to do with either of them. We are amused by their reaction, thinking that it would serve them right if he just got away. Although he promptly returns, bringing with him a clergyman in a life preserver to conduct a wedding on the spot, we've been led to question why he should stick by a girl and a father who've made such trouble for him. As in the ending of *College,* Buster here, in his eagerness to settle his triumph, entertains no second thoughts; but *we* do. And, as in *College,* those final second thoughts only point up a question that has been implicit throughout what came before: why should Buster unprotestingly comply with the undue requirements laid upon him by others?

One answer is provided in *College* by the figure of a dean, friendly to the promising young scholar and built small like him, who may be regarded as an embodiment of what his scholarly future would be like. Disappointed that Buster has been doing poorly in his studies, the older man, when he hears the explanation, tearfully reveals that he himself had loved a girl once but had lost her to an athlete. Buster would rather take on the alien territory of sports than end up alone like the dean. If all comedians are outsiders, Keaton is the outsider who will not give up the attempt to join in, to connect with others. Chaplin's Tramp, by contrast, is more or less self-sufficient, "an aristocrat," as Robert Warshow put it, "fallen on hard times." Lloyd's bespectacled democrat is a blundering free enterpriser, motivated by self-interest, patently inferior to his fellow men but aspiring to rise above them in the land of opportunity. Buster is unique in earnestly seeking a genuine togetherness. If he seems the loneliest of all comedians, it's because he's the one to whom companionship matters the most.

That loneliness is hauntingly conveyed in those distant long shots, typical of Keaton, in which he appears as a tiny figure amid large empty surroundings: in the river town during the storm, or practicing by himself in the college stadium, or (in *The Frozen North*) coming out of a subway exit into an arctic wilderness. In *The Navigator* he wakes up one morning to find himself adrift at sea on a deserted ocean liner, the epitome of the alien territories the solitary Buster is called upon to master. But he's not there all alone, as he supposes at first; the girl he wants to marry also finds herself aboard the ship. When each becomes aware of the other's presence

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somewhere on board, the two anxiously try to come together, but they keep missing each other in that huge ship. James Agee's description of this extraordinary sequence is worth quoting:

> First each walks purposefully down the long, vacant starboard deck, the girl, then Keaton, turning the corner just in time not to see each other. Next time around each of them is trotting briskly, very much in earnest; going at the same pace, they miss each other just the same. Next time around each of them is going like a bat out of hell. Again they miss. Then the camera withdraws to a point of vantage at the stern, leans its chin in its hand and just watches the whole intricate superstructure of the ship as the protagonists stroll, steal and scuttle from level to level, up, down and sidewise, always managing to miss each other by hair's-breadths, in an enchantingly neat and elaborate piece of timing.

"Enchantingly neat," with the boy and girl seeming like pieces in some gigantic clockwork geared to prevent their meeting, this sequence is at the same time a disquieting expression of the need to come together somewhere, somehow, in a forbidding world.

Pretty soon, of course, the boy and girl find each other, or rather, are brought into each other's company by the same mysterious mechanism that kept them apart. Earlier the girl had flatly turned down Buster's proposal of marriage, so it's a lucky break for him, in a way, that they have been fortuitously brought together aboard the ship; but that is only the beginning of their relationship, and they still face the formidable task of coping on their own with a drifting ocean liner which was certainly not designed for two. The girl had turned him down because she thought him an ineffectual rich boy, and indeed, when he went to propose to her, he had his chauffeur drive him to her house, directly across the street from his. Like the bookworm in *College,* the rich boy in *The Navigator* must prove himself in the unfamiliar arena of action, where, in the case of the deserted liner at sea, sheer survival is at stake. In *College* Buster is responding to the girl's demands; in *The Navigator,* to the pressure of circumstances; under that pressure, however, as during the cyclone in *Steamboat Bill Jr.,* he can measure up in the girl's eyes as earlier he could not. The girl in *The General*, like her counterpart in *The Navigator*, after having rejected Buster, joins him in his undertaking—though in both cases by necessity, not choice. And, whether he is on his own or has the girl's help—and she's not much help in either case—he must still carry out that undertaking before

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the two can have a life together. Whether required of him by the girl, or by circumstances, or by a conflation of both, that is the test he must pass to secure the place he seeks in the world.

In *The General*, we are informed at the beginning that there are two loves in Buster's life: his girl and his locomotive. He is an engineer on a Southern railroad at the time of the Civil War, so useful to the South in that capacity that the Confederate army won't enlist him; but he's not told the reason, and his girl, who had urged him to be a soldier and now assumes him to be a coward, won't have him either. So he turns to his locomotive, not because, as has been maintained, he prefers it to the girl—he was first in line at the recruiting office after she suggested he enlist—but as his only consolation. "Keaton's love for his cow, in one picture," wrote Hugh Kenner, "or for his locomotive, in another, was a love transferred from girls diminished to abstraction by inexplicable rituals of courtship, through which alone they are accessible. The locomotive's rituals he could master." He stands to lose his locomotive too, however, when some Northern spies make off with it, and he rushes in pursuit, so intent on the task ahead that he doesn't notice that the Confederate soldiers who were to join him in the chase have been left behind. Once again Buster is on his own. This is, after all, a personal matter: his locomotive has been stolen, and his girl, though he doesn't know it yet, is being kidnapped along with it. What his preference may be between the girl and the machine seems to me a false issue, since the fates of the two are thoroughly bound up together. As in *The Navigator*, it is through his mastery of the machine's rituals that he manages to get the girl. His successful recapture of his locomotive accomplishes at the same time his regaining of his girl: not only does he rescue her from the enemy, he brings back information which leads to a Southern victory against a Northern offensive, and after participating in the battle with a borrowed uniform he is enlisted in the Confederate army as a lieutenant, thus ending up as the soldier she initially wanted him to be. Buster never fulfills the girl's expectations in the expected way—his uniform is usually a borrowed one, for he's a visitor, not native—but fulfill them he must, if he is to get her.

The Navigator and *The General*, Keaton's most celebrated pictures, unfold his two most sustained engagements with the machine. As E. Rubinstein has remarked, in advance of seeing the films one

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would presume the two titles to refer to a sailor and a soldier, but they are actually the names of the ship and the locomotive which command such central importance. Both pictures indeed enact not so much a human as a mechanical drama: a drama in which, if Buster is the protagonist, the machine is not only the main scene of action but the main force actuating the proceedings. The ship in *The Navigator* amounts to nothing less than the world for the two characters aboard it, obliged as they are to conduct their lives in accordance to its system. The extended railway chase that takes up most of *The General* progresses along a single line of tracks, first in one direction as Buster pursues, then in reverse as Buster, having retrieved girl and locomotive, is pursued in turn, the course of the action thus exactly coinciding with that railway line, as if foreordained by it. The arrangements of the inanimate world exert everywhere in Keaton a governing influence on the dramatic development. All his films may be said to enact a dramaturgy of mechanics: the mechanics of a railway chase or of opening and closing an umbrella, a feat which eludes Buster at his high-school graduation in *College* but which, to his awe, a man sitting right beside him unfailingly performs; the mechanics of an unmanned ocean liner or of a motorcycle deprived of its driver, in *Sherlock Junior*, while Buster is riding on the handlebars; and the mechanics not only of machines but of other physical formations, sports, a herd of cattle compounded with city traffic in *Go West*, natural phenomena such as a cyclone, a waterfall in *Our Hospitality*, an avalanche in *Seven Chances*.

Aren't the ways of the physical world the standard business of every silent comedian? Isn't the greatest of them all supposed to be Chaplin, whose comedy is the most human, the most dependent on character and least on the pratfall and the chase? In a review of *The Gold Rush* at the time of its first release, Edmund Wilson wrote about Chaplin that "instead of the stereotyped humor of even the best of his competitors, most of whose tricks could be interchanged among them without anyone's knowing the difference, he gives us jokes that, however crude, have an unmistakable quality of personal fancy." Granted, of all the characters, comic or serious, that the silent screen portrayed, no other matches the subtlety and complexity of Chaplin's Tramp. But "an unmistakable quality of personal fancy" can be found in the work of such humble practitioners of slapstick as Laurel and Hardy: they set up their own

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relationship to a physical world they saw as the seat of disorder unamenable to man, disorder they methodically fomented themselves, having evidently concluded that there was no use fighting it. For Keaton, on the contrary, the physical world embodied the strictest order. He was the geometrician of slapstick, at opposite ends from the unruly variety exemplified by Laurel and Hardy or Mack Sennett or the Marx Brothers, in which things can be counted on to get madly out of control. Things in Keaton can be counted on to adhere rigorously to a system, a pattern as imperturbable as a line of tracks. To adopt Hugh Kenner's formulation, Keaton's universe is ruled by the implacable neatness of Newton's laws of mechanics, Laurel and Hardy's by the no less implacable disorganization, the irresistibly rising entropy, of the second law of thermodynamics. It's a mistake to suppose that all slapstick comes from the same bag of interchangeable tricks: a considerable range of attitudes can be expressed through the medium of physical comedy.

Until the rediscovery of Keaton that took place in the sixties—when his films, most of which had been thought lost, started to be circulated again—Chaplin's supremacy among screen comedians was unquestioned. Chaplin was certainly right to feel that the messy farces of Mack Sennett, his first employer in the movies, tended to dissipate his characterization; it was after he left Sennett's Keystone company, when he became his own director, that he was able to perfect his craft as an actor, and to develop an unerring sense of where to put the camera with a minimum of elaboration, bringing his pantomime comedy to a peak of refinement that seems impossible to surpass. As André Bazin has said, Chaplin used the film medium to turn the low comedy of the circus and music hall into a high art. In films, the closer view permitted by the camera exempted him from the exaggeration that would have been unavoidable on the stage; moreover, he could reshoot a scene as many times as was needed to get a certain gesture, a certain timing, just right. What Chaplin did—and by saying this I don't mean in any way to detract from his achievement—was adapt to the movies a theatrical idiom, an idiom for which, to a large extent, the silent screen was better suited than the stage. I think it helps explain the readiness with which Chaplin's greatness was recognized—almost from the beginning he was not only immensely popular, but widely hailed as a genius by critics

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and intellectuals—that he was working in a familiar idiom, bringing to fruition on the screen a long tradition of stage clowning. It took much longer for Keaton's greatness to be recognized, and even nowadays it's not so widely accepted as Chaplin's, though many regard Keaton as his equal, and some as his superior. Easy as it is to like Keaton the funnyman, it has been difficult properly to appreciate his artistry. "Keaton worked strictly for laughs, " wrote James Agee, "but his work came from so far inside a curious and original spirit that he achieved a great deal besides." What he achieved was a body of films which ranks, I believe, with the best work that has been done in this century. If he hasn't been sufficiently appreciated, it's perhaps because that "curious and original spirit" produced a kind of comedy that was wholly new, without any counterpart on the stage or in any other traditional medium.

While admiring Keaton as an actor, Edmund Wilson thought he was misused by Hollywood, forced to do those assembly-line gags which, in Wilson's view, everybody except Chaplin was turning out at the time. Hollywood, in fact, destroyed Keaton's career—Hollywood in some conjunction with the coming of sound which is hard for us to disentangle[1]—but that was after that halcyon period in the twenties when Keaton was able to work with a freedom comparable to Chaplin's. Keaton's gags were his own: done with the assistance of a team, of course, but everywhere—before, that is, he joined M-G-M in the late twenties and had to contend with a real assembly line—everywhere stamped with a distinctive personality we must assume to be his. And Wilson expressed his admiration for Keaton the actor in terms better applicable to Chaplin: "a pantomime clown of the first order." That may have been what Wilson would have wanted him to be, but Keaton, unlike Chaplin, was not principally a pantomimist. When expressing emotion—as he often does, contrary to the received idea of his face as an impassive mask—his acting approaches the naturalistic. When in action, he exercises the skills of a consummate acrobat, a mode of acting that may also, in a sense, be termed naturalistic, since the acrobatics were actually carried out by him, not faked with doubles or clever cutting. Unlike Chaplin, who shot his movies mostly in the studio, Keaton exploited the naturalistic possibilities of film, the

[1] Keaton's alcoholism is another factor that needs to be taken into account. See the recent biography by Tom Dardis: *Keaton, the Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down* (New York: Scribner, 1979).

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feeling of actuality that the medium can convey with peculiar force.

This is not to say that Keaton's movies fall into the category of naturalism. They also convey a feeling of unreality, as if the visitor dropped to this earth, unsure that our world is real, were trying to convince himself that it is by recording its strange behavior in actual earthly locations. Much of the evocative power of Keaton's films derives from their blend of actuality with a dreamlike strangeness: the dream made all the more haunting for being so convincingly materialized. Keaton manifested a concern for verisimilitude singular in a comedian. Especially in his feature-length films (the shorts are zanier), he developed his plots with unfaltering logic, kept all the incidents, however far from the ordinary, scrupulously within the realm of the possible, and took such care over the accuracy of his settings that his re-creation of the Civil War in *The General* has been compared favorably with those in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind.* The physical world he depicts is not a mere pretext for gags, but a vividly actual place, and nowhere more certifiably so than in its strict adherence to the selfsame mechanical laws that obtain in this place of our occupancy we call the real world.

At one point in *Our Hospitality* Buster is on a cliff, tied by a long rope to a man above him who loses his footing and plummets into the river below. The look on Buster's face, as he registers the inescapable gravitational consequence that he is himself imminently to be pulled down into that river, memorably summarizes his sense of his dealings with the physical universe. The universe, that look acknowledges, dictates its own terms: nothing to be done, at this point, against the pull of gravity. But that pull can on other occasions be put to one's advantage, as Buster demonstrates at the climax of this film by devising a pendulum with that same rope and himself as the suspended mass: swinging on the rope, he leaps forward from a ledge and seizes the girl just as she's being thrust over the brink of a precipitous waterfall, using gravity to overcome gravity, since thanks to the principle of the pendulum he and the girl are now swung back to safety on the ledge. It used to be assumed that Keaton regarded the physical universe as his adversary; some recent commentators have stressed his treatment of it as an ally. Indeed, its forces would often work in his favor, sometimes as a result of his harnessing them, sometimes of their own accord.

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It's surely going too far, however, for Walter Kerr to maintain that Keaton "trusted" the universe: he only trusted it to be itself, neither for nor against him, but simply and uncompromisingly *there.* As exemplified by the ship in *The Navigator,* the apparatus of the universe was not set up to accommodate him; as exemplified by the climax of *Our Hospitality,* the laws of nature acted both as his adversary and as his ally in a contest from which he could emerge victorious only through an exceedingly precarious maneuver.

He meets the forces of the waterfall by means of a machine, the pendulum, into which he incorporates himself. In that brilliantly resourceful device, calculated to intersect the girl's path at precisely the right moment, he functions as a mere weight, swinging like any other under the joint pulls of gravity and the rope. To prevail against the inanimate world, he contrives the most effective way to make himself part of it. That, generally, was the policy informing Keaton's elaborate acrobatics: to engage a mechanical universe by the strategic use of his body as a piece of the machinery, an implement which the acrobat could wield with the requisite exactitude.

Keaton's comedy of kinetics would appear to illustrate the proposition, advanced by Bergson in his well-known essay on "Laughter," that the human body becomes comical insofar as it behaves in the manner of a machine. Bergson was thinking, however, of the body as an encumbrance, unfortunately subject to the laws of matter and thus getting in the way of man's higher strivings. The body may indeed be, for most comedians, that thing which keeps tripping over other things; but not for Keaton. Although he took his share of falls, the body was for him also a means of soaring, of surmounting the obstacles in his way and achieving his objectives. Risky though the trajectories of the acrobat were, they proved to be the most reliable course of action for Buster to follow in his strivings: it was always through some physical feat that he managed to win what had been denied him otherwise.

Such prowess may seem inapposite in a comedian. "In every Keaton story," wrote John Grierson disapprovingly, "the action whoops in reel five to allow Buster Keaton the clown to become Mr. Keaton the romantic achiever of all things . . . Clowns are the world's incompetents. They are bound to the wheel of incompetence or they cease to be clowns." I don't think there is any

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inconsistency between Keaton's climactic exploits and his preceding characterization: from the beginning, his most distinctive trait has not been incompetence but perseverance, and his eventual success comes not as a miracle but as an earned victory. Whatever his falterings before he achieves his goal, he has been single-minded in his pursuit of it, a serious man, as his unsmiling face indicates, not the laughable figure of utter incompetence Grierson would have wanted him to be. Perhaps, then, Keaton nowhere qualifies as a true clown. The physical dexterity of the actor, great as that was, is not what sets him apart, for clowns are usually dexterous, their inveterate art being to elaborate a graceful rendition of perpetual fumbling. Buster applies his dexterity, however, to a practical task, a job he aims to get done; whereas the dexterity we expect of a clown is one that precisely takes delight in its waywardness, its irredeemable impracticality, its unfitness to get any job done: the orchestration of chaos in Laurel and Hardy, for example, or the elfin ballet Chaplin performs around the machines in *Modern Times.* The clown's embellishment of incompetence transforms it from mere inadequacy into a principle of behavior, a defiant alternative to the standards of the competent world: clowns, one might say, are the world's conscientious incompetents, who formalize their refusal to participate in the world's business. Chaplin's concluding departure down the road, in *Modern Times* and other films, sums up the clown's disposition: better to take the chances of one's own vagrant path than follow the instituted procedures of an uncongenial world. That is not Buster's disposition: his governing drive is to participate, to fit into the world's scheme, and he entertains no alternative.

The laws of mechanics tolerate no alternative. In the Newtonian system, once initial conditions are set, subsequent configurations evolve ineluctably. Keaton the acrobat sedulously maneuvers within the workings of that system, endeavoring to have it reach a desired configuration—such as the one bringing together the girl and himself at the coordinates of the altar. That oddly impersonal amorous approach, which would get him the girl through a mechanical rather than an emotional interaction, is called for by the world he inhabits, in which human relationships are as systematized as celestial bodies. Keaton's girls tolerate no alternative either: it is imperative that he take up sports, or join the Confederate army—or, in *Battling Butler,* that he fight a world boxing cham-

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pion—if he wants anything to do with them. The equation that is made in *The General* between the girl and the locomotive—he loves them both, loses them both, rescues them both in the same action—exemplifies the fundamental identity Keaton posits between the human and the inanimate realms, between the unbending conventions ruling human transactions and Newton's immutable laws. Initial conditions, in Keaton's universe as in Newton's, determine subsequent behavior, and in Keaton's case they extend from the physical—the layout of an ocean liner, the course of railroad tracks—to the conditions of a girl whose mind is made up as to the qualities she would like in a fiancé.

Although inflexible, the girl's conditions are not capricious: it's not her own predilection that her boyfriend should be a soldier or an athlete, but a reflection of the standards prevalent in the community, an instance of the beliefs generally shared by Southerners at the time of the Confederacy or by students at an American college. In courting the girl, Buster at the same time is seeking admission in the community of which she is a representative member. When she rejects him, it's not because she doesn't like him, not for reasons of personal taste, but because, judging him by criteria that every nice girl has been taught to apply to any suitor, she finds him wanting in the qualities sanctioned by general agreement. Buster's problems with the girl, that is, are not a private matter: winning her is tantamount to gaining the acceptance of all, to belonging at long last in the midst of human fellowship. He is the visitor, she the native whose favors will be granted him only if he satisfies the norms of the tribe, as a kind of certificate of naturalization.

Our Hospitality, which was Keaton's first full-length film—I'm discounting *The Saphead,* somebody else's film in which Keaton was merely an actor, and *The Three Ages,* a film of feature length which is made up of three shorts strung together—differs in some interesting ways from most of the others. It portrays the world of the rural Old South, about thirty years before the Civil War, a setting in which mechanization has barely begun to make an appearance. In order to claim a Southern inheritance, Buster travels down there from New York in a train so primitive that a dog's gait can keep pace with it and a recalcitrant donkey can block its course, necessitating that the tracks be manually displaced to circumvent the immovable animal. These are hardly the tracks in *The General,* which determine the course of the action: by contrast, the machines in

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Our Hospitality—the train, the guns the characters attempt without much success to fire—are pretty ineffectual. Even Buster's rescuing pendulum at the waterfall is a makeshift device just able to snatch the girl from the forces of nature. The interaction between Buster and the girl is also portrayed differently in *Our Hospitality*—perhaps, as Walter Kerr has suggested, because the actress playing her this time, Natalie Talmadge, was Keaton's own wife. This girl, in any case, gives Buster no trouble: she takes to him from their first meeting aboard the train; she invites him to dinner at her Southern home when they arrive at their destination; and she sides with him against her father and brothers, who, as she and Buster learn only after he's come to dinner, aim to kill him.

The reason they aim to kill him is nothing personal: they didn't even know him before his arrival in town. But they've discovered that he is the heir to a Southern family with which their own family has been carrying on a long-standing feud, a feud they feel bound to resume now that he has turned up: so they are after him by convention, because the code of feuding demands it. While he's a guest in their house, however, they're prevented from killing him by another convention: the laws of Southern hospitality dictate that they welcome him, treat him with the utmost courtesy, offer him a plentiful meal. They even put him up for the night when a rainstorm breaks out and Buster, who by now has caught on to the situation, takes advantage of the weather to prolong his stay, knowing that he's safe so long as he remains under their roof. (Most comedians would have played much more on the character's ignorance of such a situation, but Keaton, distinctively, soon makes his character aware of it, and plays on the stratagems afforded by that awareness.) The moment he steps outside the house, the well-treated guest becomes the sworn enemy, hospitality ceases and by an automatic switch in conventions feuding assumes jurisdiction. The girl's love for Buster, her pleading with her father and brothers in his behalf, makes no difference in their formularized behavior. Even after he's saved her life they're ready to kill him, and stop only when they find that the girl and Buster have just been married, the feud convention being superseded at this point not by warm sentiments but by yet another convention: marriage into the family. In the pre-industrial, pastoral Old South of *Our Hospitality,* where Buster has to strive neither with elaborate machines nor with a girl who holds back her love, the coalition of im-

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placable natural forces and rigid social conventions nonetheless makes for a vast impersonal apparatus scarcely more accommodating than the ship in *The Navigator.*

It may be instructive to compare the South in *Our Hospitality* with the Ireland John Ford depicts in *The Quiet Man,* which is also a comedy about the difficulties of an outsider in a traditional community. Nothing so extreme as a feud threatens Ford's protagonist (John Wayne), an American gone to live in an Irish village, but his situation bears some resemblance to that of Keaton's New Yorker down South. In each case the protagonist has returned to the rural place of his birth, which neither had seen since childhood, with a mind to settle there, expecting it to be idyllic; the looks of the place, the natural beauty rendered vividly on the screen by both Keaton and Ford, would seem in each case to fulfill that expectation; but in each case the outsider is soon disappointed. Like Buster, the character played by John Wayne falls in love with a local woman (Maureen O'Hara) who loves him too but with whose family he finds he must contend: her older brother detests him, and according to Irish custom without this brother's consent she cannot be married. The trouble persists even after the couple are married: the brother, when he learns he's been tricked into giving his consent, retaliates by withholding the bride's dowry, which doesn't matter at all to the American, but which the Irishwoman feels she must have if she is to be a proper wife; moreover, she feels that the American, if he is to be a proper husband, must prove his mettle, to her and to the entire village, by standing up to her brother and fighting him for the dowry that is due her; and so she withholds herself from her husband until he does as she sees fit. Thus summarized, the plot of *The Quiet Man* sounds like the plot of a Keaton movie, with the wife, in the demands she makes as a paradigm of convention, behaving more like the usual Keaton heroine than does the girl in *Our Hospitality.* Ford's slant on this material, however, differs considerably from what Keaton's would have been.

For good reasons of his own, the husband in *The Quiet Man* is unwilling to fight the brother: he had been a professional boxer in America, and quit after killing an opponent in the ring, at which point he vowed to himself never to fight anybody again. He had imagined Ireland would be a tranquil haven where he could be a quiet man. But his wife has reasons that are more than private for

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his fighting in this circumstance: in addition to her self-esteem, the esteem of their neighbors—the couple's public standing—depends on it. When he eventually gives in and confronts her brother, Ford treats the extended fight sequence as a kind of dance of celebration involving everyone in the village, a ceremony of the American's initiation into the Irish community. The private reasons, in Ford's view, must give in to the public, the American's romantic notions of Ireland to the realities of his living there with his fellow men. Once he accepts the communal traditions, the established forms of human interplay, his life in that beautiful setting, the film assures us, will be a happy one. So Ford elevates the rituals of the community above the idiosyncracies of the individual—in contrast with Keaton, who presents the rituals of Southern hospitality and feuding as absurdly conventionalized.

Yet Keaton leaves his character no option except adjusting to such absurd rituals: life in *that* beautiful setting, no less than in Ford's Ireland, necessitates conformity with the traditions of its inhabitants. These traditions may be murderous if one happens to be a member of a rival family, but otherwise they seem hospitable enough, and after the marriage brings reconciliation they may well allow for the reputed ease and amenities of old-fashioned Southern living. They are, in any case, the law of the land, strictly enforced by its unpersuadable inhabitants, and anyone wishing to settle there has no choice but to submit. Neither in *Our Hospitality* nor anywhere else can Keaton be said to celebrate the community: he sees its conventions as arcane dictates, intricate and arbitrary yet somehow accepted by everyone without question, the bizarre social equivalent of mechanical determinism. Any attempt at rebellion or escape, however, seems inconceivable to Buster: who would heed his rebellion? what place can he hope to escape to that he would find more congenial? He must work with the existing situation, try to make the best of it, or else face the dread prospect of irremediable loneliness. So, although Keaton by no means elevates the community above the individual, he still, like Ford, presents it as the individual's only harbor.

Keaton's equation between mechanical systems and human conduct is pointedly illustrated by two gags, one from *The General* involving a railroad car, the other from *Steamboat Bill Jr.* involving the girl, and both exploiting the same idea. Through Buster's pur-

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suit of the Northerners in *The General,* various obstacles are laid in his path, among them a freight car disengaged from the stolen train. Buster shunts the car onto a siding, and believing he's solved that problem he turns his attention to other work that needs to be done, thus failing to notice that the course the car follows on the siding soon rejoins the main track. The next time he looks, he finds the car he thought he had sidetracked again before him. Unable to deal with it at the moment, having yet other pressing matters to attend to, he turns away again and now fails to see that the problem is solved for him by a log, which the Northerners have laid on the track as another obstacle but which instead serves to derail the obstructive car. When he looks once more, prepared to contend with the car that had unaccountably resurged, he finds that, as unaccountably, it's vanished. The gag in *Steamboat Bill* plays on a similar appearing and disappearing, this time not by an inanimate object, in accordance with the laws of motion, but by the girl, in accordance with her emotions. This occurs when Buster runs into her while on his way to take the next train back to Boston; having alienated both her and his father, he's concluded there's nothing to keep him in the river town. On meeting her, however, he pauses and begins to give her an explanation, diffidently, with his eyes turned downward, assuming she would listen. So he doesn't see that she chooses to snub him, walks right past by him and into a building: the next time he looks, no sign of her is to be found. Puzzled, he proceeds on his way, and now cannot see that, behind his back, she's come out of the building and follows him steadily from a distance, no longer wishing to ignore him but hesitating to address him. He doesn't know that she's behind him, and in front of him, moreover, something unexpected happens that takes his mind away from any further pondering of her whereabouts: his father is thrown into jail. Deciding not to leave town under the circumstances, but to stay and help his father, Buster turns around to head for home, and the girl behind him, at a loss for what to do, turns around too, so, as it looks from his perspective, she's reappeared out of nowhere with her back to him and briskly walking away. The girl's psychology is as clear to us as the physics of the railroad car; but in both cases the governing mechanism is hidden from Buster, and we can appreciate his perplexity in confronting the manifestations discernible to him. A sense is conveyed of that perplexing process, that generally hidden mechanism, by which things come to be as they appear before our eyes.

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In a visual strategy typical of Keaton's style as a director, the entire progress of the sidetracked car, how it runs parallel to the main line and then rejoins it, is shown in the background of an uninterrupted traveling shot, with Buster in the foreground all the while, too busy stoking his engine to mind anything else. This use of deep focus, even as it simultaneously reveals both the car's trajectory and the reason for Buster's inattention, yet conveys the feeling that it's terribly easy for any of us to miss what's important in our environment. The car is right there, visible to us behind him, and if only he'd known to look, a mere turning of the head would have sufficed to apprise him of the situation. Furthermore, the car, although clearly visible in the shot, is pretty far in the background and near the edge of the screen, barely within our field of vision: we feel that we, too, might easily have missed that crucial detail with only a slight shift in the camera angle. By a similar use of deep focus in *Steamboat Bill*, the girl covertly following Buster appears in the background of the shot and he in the foreground, his attention again otherwise engaged. In neither case does Keaton cut to reveal to us what's hidden from his character: instead he shows it taking place in the same shot, rather as if the camera had picked it up by happenstance. A cut to a closer view either of the car or of the girl would have been like a nudge signaling to us that this is privileged information, made available for our benefit as spectators while the character remains in the dark; that would have tended to encourage in us a comfortable feeling of omniscience, of our superiority over Buster in being given access to all the pertinent facts unknown to him. As it is, we see more than he does, but are kept aware of the difficulty, which we generally share with him, in looking where we need to look, seeing what needs to be seen.

Another gag in *The General*—perhaps the most famous one from that film, beautifully sustained and well worthy of the praise it has received—also depends on a counterpoint between background, where a significant occurrence unfolds, and foreground, where Buster is too busy with other things to pay attention. More than an important detail, what Buster fails to notice this time is positively momentous: whole armies moving behind him, first Southern troops retreating, then Northern troops advancing, while Buster, moving in the opposite direction in his pursuit of the stolen locomotive, has eyes only for the wood he's chopping to use as fuel. Admittedly, it's not easy to miss an army going by in one's vicinity, and E. Rubinstein, in his valuable monograph on the film, calls this an instance of Buster's "myopic absorption with his labors."

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But Buster's labors are no less than herculean in his singlehanded endeavor to retrieve his locomotive from the Northern raiders; given all the things he has to do, I wouldn't say he's "myopic" to have no time for an exploratory glance at the surrounding countryside. When he eventually looks up from his task and at the enemy troops around him, it's not behind him, where we've been watching the military movements, that he looks first: he stares before him instead, where, as a shot from his point of view now reveals, there are troops too. We may have thought we had a commanding view of the situation, but now we recognize that there was a whole other side we had not previously seen, a side that had been hidden behind the camera just as the troops within our view were hidden behind Buster's back. There were, so to speak, troops behind our backs too. The soldiers' presence in back of him was something that we'd expected he'd sooner or later discover, to his surprise; their presence in front we're rather surprised to discover ourselves. Although his surprise is of course greater, his moment of discovery coincides with ours, and he finds out something that we didn't already know. If his perspective is limited, so also, we're not allowed to forget, is ours.

In this instance Keaton cuts, to show us that other side, when most directors wouldn't have: it's standard practice in films to keep the camera as often as possible on the same side of the action, for having it switch sides, unless necessary for the purposes of dramatic exposition, is thought to be undesirably disorienting. Here the troops in front catch us unawares without bringing on a change in the plot—they're not, say, Southern troops coming to Buster's aid—so most directors would have preferred to omit them, and arrange for the character to make his discovery by looking in back, to the territory we're familiar with. Keaton's cut serves no dramatic purpose: rather it acts as a reminder that the world is always larger than any of us can see. More often, as with the sidetracked car or the shadowing girl, Keaton doesn't cut when most directors would have. His procedure, in either case, responds to the same principle: he denies to the camera its usual role of ideal observer, conventionally endowed with the preternatural capacity to pick out just what is pertinent, to bring into view exactly that section of the world which we need to see at this point in the dramatic development. Keeping the camera on the same side encourages us to discount the possible relevance of the other side, to feel certain that nothing of significance, such as half an army, may be hidden behind the cam-

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era; cutting closer to an important detail similarly reassures us that the camera wouldn't fail to notice anything important.

In the films of a director such as Hitchcock, who regularly restricts the point of view to that of one of the characters, the limitation in our perspective does not really strike us as *our* limitation, since we vicariously attribute it to a participant in the story. The withheld pieces of information are a gap in somebody else's knowledge, and their being withheld from us is a premise which we are to accept in the interests of dramatic effect. With Hitchcock, the camera is denied omniscience but still granted the status of an ideal observer, whose calculated assumption of a character's point of view is posited as the exactly appropriate manner of unfolding the plot. With Keaton, we're allowed to know more than the character does while being made conscious of our own limited perspective, so we cannot attribute that limitation to anybody else, to anything other than the fact that none of us has the ability to see in back of his head, that each of us must make do with the information accessible to the one pair of eyes he's endowed with in this vast world. Hitchcock shares with Keaton a preoccupation with characters who find themselves on their own in a perilous environment. The difference in the results—suspense with elements of comedy as opposed to comedy with elements of suspense—derives in part from the way that Hitchcock's camera promotes our identification with the character, whereas Keaton's keeps us at a distance, in a frame of mind that more readily permits our laughter. And yet it seems to me that Keaton's camera, in a more profound way than Hitchcock's, adopts toward the world the same stance as his character. Hitchcock is a consummate manipulator who plays a knowing game with the camera all through the character's difficulties: the character may be at a loss but the director—when in good form, that is—never betrays a moment's hesitation in his cunning moves to elicit from us the response he wants. Keaton's command of film technique is no less assured than Hitchcock's, but he refuses to assume such an authoritative posture in his handling of the camera. Rather than as an ideal observer, he treats it as an explorer faced with an uncharted terrain of incalculable dimensions, able to cover only so much ground and liable to miss some significant feature—thus putting the camera on equal footing with his character, the visitor puzzled by an unfamiliar land yet seeking a place in it.

Lest this suggest anything awkward or desultory about Keaton's

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camera work, I should stress its distinctive elegance, its geometric finesse. In *Sherlock Junior*, for example, when Buster, the naive would-be detective, follows a suspect so conscientiously that he walks about a foot behind and all but trips over the man, the camera follows as steadily in a brisk, smooth traveling shot which perfectly mirrors the character's intentness and much enhances the comic effect. Or consider another eloquent traveling shot, the first of several in *The General* which show Buster engrossed in chopping wood against the background of troops unseen by him. In all these shots the camera moves in the same direction as Buster, opposite to the troops; in the first one, however, it does not keep pace with him, so that he appears to overtake the camera—he enters frame, passes through the shot and goes beyond—which tellingly conveys a sense of his inadvertent daring in so plunging into enemy territory, faster than the camera seems initially prepared to go. Keaton developed, no doubt intuitively, an original cinematic style beautifully suited to his purposes. His penchant for deep focus and long takes, his avoidance of close-ups and reduction of cuts—an approach unappreciated by his contemporaries, who were schooled in Griffith's editing and Eisenstein's montage—assisted his rediscovery by film critics in the sixties, when André Bazin's anti-montage conceptions became widely influential. Keaton's work indeed resembles, and more than in his use of this or that similar technique, the work of such later directors as Renoir and Antonioni, who also employ the camera to conduct an inquiry into the world rather than to parcel out the answers. His films differ from theirs, however, in being as much the actor's as the director's: Keaton's inquiry, one might say, is a joint endeavor, a venture undertaken by his character and camera together. The director performs as deftly in his shots as the actor does in his acrobatics, but they both seem precariously poised in their dealings with an uncertain situation.

Keaton and Chaplin are the two great film-makers who are also great actors and who build their films around the characters they play. (Orson Welles might be proposed as a third man in this category, but only once, in *Citizen Kane*, have his acting and directing combined into a work of comparable stature.) Both Keaton and Chaplin (like Welles) began their careers in the theater, both at a very young age (Keaton at three, in his parents' act in vaudeville). Coming to films after a formative experience acting in that in-

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tegral space, the stage, where no such thing as a cut is allowed to interrupt a performance, both of them brought to films a respect for the actor's continuity and a wariness of the editor's scissors: in their craft as film directors they both take care to preserve, on the screen, the integrity of the actor's space. The actor's discomfort with the disjunctions of film editing is expressed in that wonderful sequence from *Sherlock Junior* in which Buster, asleep on his job as a movie projectionist, dreams that he walks up to the screen and into the movie being projected. It's as if Keaton had stepped into a movie directed by D. W. Griffith, and didn't like it: the locale keeps shifting on him, by abrupt cutting, while he remains continuously himself, in the same place on the screen from one shot to the next through all the cuts disconcertingly transporting him from one place to another, his performance uninterrupted even as he finds himself now amid city traffic, now up on a mountain, now by a choppy sea, now surrounded by beasts in the jungle. This sequence is a special case of the visitor's situation recurrent with Keaton: here he's a visitor not anywhere on earth but in the world of somebody else's movie, a movie made in a style, foreign to his own, which denies him a unified space for his performance.

Such a unified space for the actor to act in is established on the screen by Chaplin and Keaton alike. Chaplin's peerless pantomimes—his mock sermon on David and Goliath in *The Pilgrim*, for example, or his little dance with the buns in *The Gold Rush*—unfold in such a space, commanding the camera's undivided attention; and in such a space Keaton displays his intricate acrobatics, convincing us that they were actual feats rather than tricks of the cutting room. It's a different kind of space, however, with Chaplin and with Keaton. Chaplin's space recalls the stage not only in its integrity but in its quality of enclosure, in our sense of a demarcated area—the area of a pulpit during the mock sermon, the area of a table during the bun dance—within which each scene is contained. The size of that area may vary, but its boundaries are usually well defined, and the action rarely extends beyond them for the duration of the scene—quite unlike the action in Keaton, which regularly spreads out over a field of indefinite size. Chaplin's practice of shooting in the studio, and in sets at least slightly stylized, partly accounts for this feeling of confinement; but the studio can be made to yield the illusion of a much larger area, and Chaplin's sets feel nearly as confined as stage sets. Conversely, the use of

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actual locations by no means ensures the sense of an open space we get in Keaton's films: actual locations can be treated much like a stage backdrop—as indeed Chaplin treats them on the occasions in which he uses them—but Keaton is one of the few directors who truly engages an environment and makes us aware that the screen can hardly encompass the dimensions of the actual place. More than in their choice of settings, Chaplin and Keaton differ in the basic conformation of their space, a space corresponding, with Chaplin, to the stage, and with Keaton, to the world.

In both cases the actor's space befits the kind of character he plays. "Chaplin's Tramp," wrote Robert Warshow,

> . . . represented the good-hearted and personally cultivated individual in a heartless and vulgar society. The society was concerned only with the pursuit of profit, and often not even with that so much as with the mere preservation of the ugly and impersonal machinery by which the profit was gained; the Tramp was concerned with the practice of personal relations and the social graces. Most of all the Tramp was like an aristocrat fallen on hard times, for what he attempted in all his behavior was to maintain certain standards of refinement and humanity, to keep life dignified and make it emotionally and aesthetically satisfying.

The Tramp, then, is the man who stands apart, the exceptional individual misunderstood and rejected by the society around him, a better grade of human being whose unfitness for the tasks of that society only underscores his personal superiority, his interest in higher things. Although Chaplin's films carry a social protest, an appeal for change, he does not propose his character as any sort of revolutionary, for the Tramp would be as unfit to take any action against the society as he is to work within its constrictions; moreover, he is too insular to show much solidarity with the poor, and too singular to be regarded as typical of them. We are to side with the Tramp for his intrinsic human qualities, for what he is in himself, apart from anything he does or could do or anything he stands for beyond himself. His strongest bond is with us, the spectators, rather than with any of the other characters in the film: he communicates with us (to borrow Louise Brooks's phrase) in a kind of intense isolation, tacitly addressing us with an entreaty for us to recognize his fine qualities and the injustice of a society which does not. Sometimes he gets the girl, but never as a result of his having undertaken any conventional courtship: he gets her because she,

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like us, is sensitive enough to appreciate his personal worth. (In *The Gold Rush*, the one film in which the Tramp makes good, ending up as a millionaire, the logic of the character demands that he come to his money fortuitously, not through his own efforts; and that the girl, when he runs into her aboard a ship at the end, accept him *as a tramp*, in a scene arranged so that she thinks he's a stowaway and offers to pay for his passage, before she finds out about his money.) It would be an exaggeration to say that Chaplin needs no space outside of himself to realize his character: something like a bare stage would not do for the Tramp, who exists in relation to a milieu which Chaplin's sets pithily evoke. In Chaplin's circumscribed space, however, the setting becomes strictly subordinate to the character, and that little fellow scraping through on the outskirts of society assumes on the screen his rightful place at the center of things. That place, due him by virtue of his higher humanity and denied him in a society which has no place for that humanity, must be granted him, Chaplin implies, in a space closed off from the world and constituted for the little fellow's benefit. The man who stands apart from that vulgar milieu deserves, in Chaplin's view, a space set apart for the proper display of his unique attributes. Unlike the Tramp, Keaton's character wants a place in the world, not just in our hearts, and not a special place, but one like everybody else's, so Buster accordingly inhabits a space which seems as large as the world and in which he enjoys no primacy over his surroundings.

If the society will not accommodate the Tramp, that is for Chaplin sufficient reason to condemn it, and he concentrates our attention on his character's personal qualities, upholding them against an order which callously discounts them. The world that Keaton depicts, though not so inimical to the character, is even more impersonal, even more indifferent to the claims of individuality. Now and again the Tramp comes across a responsive soul, a girl, a kid, men such as the artist who befriends him in *The Immigrant* or the alcoholic millionaire in *City Lights* who, when sober, rebuffs him, but who at least intermittently takes him to his heart. Nobody in Keaton's world ever departs from the established patterns of behavior; there are no exceptions made in this or that individual case, no exemptions from the rules of courtship granted on account of personal niceness. And Buster has no expectations that things will be otherwise: he accepts the formulistic nature of the

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world he inhabits and attempts to integrate himself into its formulas, knowing that considerations of personality will have no more effect on the conduct of its inhabitants than on the fall of an apple from a tree.

Even when the Tramp finds himself all alone, rejected by everyone in the film, he still has us, the main recipients of his personal appeal: his directing that appeal to us of course stresses his alienation from his milieu, but it also indicates Chaplin's confidence that the appeal will be heeded, and thus his hope that the established order will be changed. Buster seems to have no thought for us, occupied as he always is with some demanding task at hand—and convinced, we may surmise, that soliciting anybody's sympathy, ours included, is not going to make any difference. (In *The Cameraman*, the first picture Keaton made for M-G-M after he lost his independence, we can tell that the studio gagmen have tampered with his conception the moment the girl is drawn to Buster because she feels sorry for him.) Keaton's universe is beyond condemnation, and beyond appeal: if it refuses to accommodate personality, there is no point in contesting that, in insisting that things ought not to be so. Whereas the Tramp, above all, projects his personality, Buster suppresses his as much as he can, given that it fits nowhere in a set scheme of things. Personal feelings, which Buster has nonetheless, he might as well not be having, and so tries not to display: hence that famous Keaton face, which is not expressionless at all but on which the expression surfaces as if against his will.

Finding himself in a world of inexorable interlocking systems such as Hawthorne describes in "Wakefield," Buster would not risk stepping aside in his pursuit of a place in the scheme of things; any diversion might lead to his falling hopelessly out of step with the world around him. Other people are nicely adjusted to that world: they play their sports, carry on their feuds, wage their wars, go about their daily business with unruffled expertise in the way things are done: as they belong in the world, so too Buster aspires to belong. But they are natives, and their procedures are to him like an arduous and convoluted foreign language which requires his intent application and which, try as he may, he can never master with their sure fluency. Truly to belong in that immense machine which is Keaton's world, a man must conduct himself with the unthinking proficiency of a machine; and that's not something

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Buster can manage. The impersonal skills of the acrobat, his best resource in dealing with the scheme of things, he yet fails to make wholly impersonal: the movements of his body remain distinctively his own, unmistakable even in extreme long shot. And on his face his thoughts and feelings are equally unmistakable: they persist in showing through that would-be blank countenance.

It is Keaton's genius as an actor to keep a face so nearly deadpan and yet render it, by subtle inflections, so vividly expressive of inner life. His large deep eyes are the most eloquent feature: with merely a stare he can convey a wide range of emotions, from longing to mistrust, from puzzlement to sorrow. A poignant instance occurs in *Sherlock Junior* during a visit Buster pays to the girl he's courting. He has brought her the conventional present of a box of candies, and she responds with the conventional gesture of putting her hand between them on the couch where they're both sitting; then, not quite daring to hold her hand but stirred by her offering it, he shuts his eyes in a moment of bashful bliss. She doesn't notice this, nor does the camera come in closer to give it emphasis: it's a private moment, and his eyes, by a very little, betray its subdued intensity.

Keaton rightly avoids close-ups in portraying a character who tries so hard to avoid isolation from his environment. Through other means, however, he brings his character's face into prominence. A strategy he often employs, and one of his invention, is the frontal view taken from some distance, the long shot or sometimes medium shot which, while showing Buster in the midst of things, singles out his face by showing him looking almost straight at the camera. In *The General* there are many such shots: when Buster looks up to discover the troops around him, for example; or when, inspecting the tracks ahead, he blinks in astonishment at the disappearance of the reappeared car; or when, giving up his initial attempt to enlist in the Confederate army, he addresses the recruiting officer who has turned him down, and says with a hurt expression: "Don't blame me if you lose this war." At the end of *Sherlock Junior*, Buster and the girl are reconciled in the booth where he's at work projecting a movie, and, unsure of how to proceed with her, he seeks instruction in the ways of romance from the lovers in the movie, turning periodically to the screen to see what he should do next; here too he's photographed head-on, through the booth window as he looks out, which points up his inquisitive

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gaze—and eventually his bewildered stare when the movie to which he looks for guidance skips all the intermediary steps between a kiss and a marriage with children. Perhaps the most striking of these frontal shots is the one in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* which shows Buster changing hats. Brought to a haberdashery by his father, who disapproves of the beret he's been wearing and aims to get him a proper hat, he stands before a mirror while variegated hats are tried on him in succession, each making him seem different, as if he were rapidly donning and discarding a succession of identities, all of them imposed on him from the outside, none of them consonant with the inside which we perceive through his forlorn eyes. Here his eyes are fixed on the camera for the longest stretch of all, since no cuts are needed to show us what he's looking at: the camera takes the place of the mirror, and Buster stares at it as at his own reflection. In each of these frontal shots, it must be stressed, the object of Buster's gaze is clearly established as something specific in his environment, so that his eyes appear directed not at the camera itself but at some point past it which claims his attention. We never get the feeling that he's looking at us: the effect, instead, is of our looking into him.

Before the mirror in *Steamboat Bill*, however, the object of his attention happens to be his own image, and that shot has the quality of an introspective monologue, an apprehensive meditation on his own condition. Literally his view of himself, that shot becomes an epitome of Keaton's view of the self as a foreign entity in the world, a visitor forever having to borrow the world's uniforms, and uncomfortable in any of them. The collegiate outfit that Buster affects at the beginning of this film was the fashion in Boston, but in a Southern river town his father is appalled to encounter an arriving son in a beret and a little mustache who is playing a ukelele and singing and dancing to it. (Buster is trying to pacify a baby he accidentally caused to cry, but his father doesn't know about the baby, and concludes that his son is in the habit of breaking into song and dance in the street.) The steamboat captain proceeds to strip away an outfit he finds offensively effeminate: the beret must be replaced, the mustache he has a barber shave off, the ukelele he crushes under his foot. More than these particular items, the principles on which Buster has based his life till now are thrown into question. At the haberdashery, without the trappings of a Boston collegian, he stares into the mirror and sees for the first time the

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hopeless discrepancy between his inner being and any of the roles he may have to assume in his dealings with the external world.

Such a dawning of self-consciousness usually occurs early on in Keaton's films, as when the rich boy in *The Navigator*, all dressed up on his first morning on board for a breakfast that nobody is there to serve him, comes to realize that the ocean liner is deserted. In *Sherlock Junior*, the format of a film within the film delays that dawning until the end, when the projectionist is left staring out of the booth window and scratching his head. At that point, in any case, Buster is led to a fearful reappraisal. The unexamined life of the rich boy who expected everything to be done for him, or of the projectionist who looked to the model of fictional detectives, or of the college boy who followed the Bostonian fashion, can no longer continue: Buster comes to the recognition that he must drop his previous assumptions and make a new start, taking nothing for granted in the endeavor, so much more difficult than he thought, of setting up residence in the world. From then on, he looks at life with perpetually questioning eyes, knowing he cannot afford to relax his vigilant scrutiny; even amid the urgency of action, while executing some wondrous feat, he retains that perplexed, pondering gaze which attests to his self-consciousness. I believe it was Robert Bresson—another practitioner of the deadpan approach, though in a very different way from Keaton's—who defined originality as the failed attempt to do the same as everybody else: a definition which applies exactly to Buster. For all his efforts to join in, and all his eventual successes in meeting the forces outside, inside he cannot shake off the sense of his singularity. He thinks, therefore he stands alone in a world where no other minds are discernible, only systems of behavior. Ultimately he remains even more isolated than Chaplin's Tramp, since it's not Buster's individual qualities that single him out—these he hardly lets interfere in his transactions with others—but the very fact of his individuality, of his possessing the inner dimension of a self in the realm of the formula.

Buster is not, then, Grierson's "romantic achiever of all things," but a bewildered equilibrist whose mind runs counter to the achievements of his body: a new kind of clown who may not so often trip over physical objects but who, so to speak, keeps tripping over his thoughts. The charming incompetence of the traditional clown was the conception of an earlier time, with more room for eccentricity than has been allowed in our ruthless century: things

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were not so good then, of course—things never have been—but at least the clown could thumb his nose at the world and expect the world to let him be. He would puncture our lofty pretensions with his reminder of the claims of the body, of the fact that in our flesh and blood we all fumble our way through life. That conception hasn't lost its validity, and Chaplin can still use it to portray a doughboy in *Shoulder Arms* or a factory worker in *Modern Times*; but he was looking back to a Victorian humanism which decidedly fails him when portraying a Jew under the Nazis in *The Great Dictator.* Keaton reverses that conception: to our age of increasing mindlessness, he offers a comedy of mind. Although he never dealt with contemporary issues as Chaplin did, he accurately depicts the landscape of our time in its vast inhuman organization. He reminds us of the claims of consciousness against a mechanistic order, of the fact that our expert procedures and outward accomplishments take no account of our inner nature. Whereas the old clowns would assert our right to our idiosyncrasies, he asserts our need to live with one another in a community that does justice to our individuality. The sadness that emerges at the end of *College* underlies all of Keaton's happy endings: it is the sadness of inescapable isolation, of knowing that he does not in the end, any more than he did at the beginning, belong in a world where happiness is available only as a convention. Yet Buster has done his best, and leaves us with the haunting image of his solemn and solitary figure, at once purposeful and detached, bravely attempting the impossible.

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LUCILLE DAY

King of the Mountain

Karen was nothing but bad. At sixteen
she wore skin-tight black leather pants and had
"Mr. Sinner" tattooed on her wrist. Everyone said
she carried a gun and slept with women.

She was stabbed eighty-seven times in Santa Cruz
when she was twenty-two.
That's approximate: there were so many wounds
the coroner could hardly count them.

What I remember best, though,
is when we were kids, quickly licking fingers
dipped in chocolate chip cookie dough
when her mother wasn't looking.

Karen was the tomboy on our street: she could
beat up any boy, and when we played
King of the Mountain, no one
could ever get her down, but once she let me win.

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Applying for AFDC

I sat in the Welfare Office
in nylons and spike-heeled shoes,
hair stacked to make my height
between six-two and six-four.

I wore a tight black sleeveless dress,
a black eyeliner mole
on my right cheek, and a gold
snake bracelet coiled on my upper arm.

A woman in tennis shoes and a red muumuu
who'd been waiting all morning
cursed the girl at the desk.
A small boy yelled, "Right on!"

Social workers frowned in all the doorways.
I chain-smoked Marlboros
and paced the floor. Changing
my baby's diapers for the third time

in the restroom, I noticed my shadow—
a flat lady, cringing in the corner.
The gaudy one in the mirror grimaced at me.
You'd think I owed them something—these
strangers I'd rather ignore.

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Neurochemist

Past the insectary and deserted labs
I stride. Like boredom and bad dreams,
empty rooms open on either side of me.

In blue jeans and tie-dyed coat I climb
past the boa cage and metal boxes
of rats and mice, smelling of sawdust and crap.

I select a cage containing five pink-eyed
puffs of white fur, and take my scissors—rusted,
blood-stained, and dulled from cutting through bone.

It's the brain I want, with its stellate cells
and elegantly fluted lobes. The mice
know my coarse white gloves. One whiff and they

scramble, squealing, in every direction,
but I grab one around the soft, pulsing belly.
When it writhes, I tighten my grip.

Quickly I cut through the neck and drop
the twitching body into the sink. Blood spurts
as the heart clamps shut. I hold the head,

mouth open, eyes distant, glazed; I prepare
to enter the skull, looking for what fills
that hollow place: mud, quicksand, love.

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GRACE SCHULMAN

The Stars and the Moon

In The Legends of the Jews, *Louis Ginzberg writes that an Egyptian princess hung a tapestry woven with diamonds and pearls above King Solomon's bed. When the king wanted to rise, he thought he saw stars and, believing it was night, slept on.*

Scaling ladders with buckets of white enamel,
I painted the stars and the moon on my window panes
to hold back days and nights. I yanked the telephone,
and stopped the wooden clock. The weeks a lightning-stroke,
desire turned into love. With my blue diamond,
I sliced minutes in half and made days vanish,
fooling the hours.

I became so skillful
at firmaments that miracles occurred:
a bearded comet moved across the room
breeding no omens, tearing no major kingdoms
into small provinces, but there it was,
reminding us that rock may spin and flare,
lifting the senses, burning into sight.

You eased pale hands away; I saw your shoulders
recede through doorways, watched your image fail
with your famished smile. I left our room
with dream-filled eyes and, standing in the sun,
I gazed at bricks and glass and saw, suddenly,
flashing in stony light, the stars and the moon.

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BERT O. STATES

Phenomenology of the Curtain Call

THE CURTAIN CALL BELONGS most broadly to the tradition of the parting, the introduction of the speaker, the invocation, and the recessional—in other words, to the whole realm of formal beginnings and endings whereby we punctuate the events of social life and rescue them from the indifferent drift of time. Consider how intolerable it would be if at the end of a performance of *Hamlet* the actors simply rose from the dead, brushed themselves off, and retired to their dressing rooms like workers punching out at quitting time.

To be more specific, the curtain call is a seam in social nature: actually, a beginning *and* an ending, a return and a farewell. Kierkegaard might have assigned it to the "category of the interesting" insofar as the curtain call is a turning point or "border category" between aesthetics and manners.[1] In any case, since a seam by definition contains only what it joins, to talk about the curtain call at all is to talk about both art and manners, in this instance two forms of role-playing. In Aristotelian terms, we could describe it as the reversal/recognition of the actor-audience relationship: both have been liberated from the strain of art; they have come out of hiding, out of the slumber of the illusion, as Puck says in the epilogue of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and have become "friends." The phenomenological question would be: what is this friendly conversation between bow and applause all about? Or, on the theory that the end is somehow justified by the means, what does this ending tell us about "the end" or purpose of playing?

As a more useful metaphor we might think of the curtain call as a decompression chamber halfway between "the depths" of art and the thin air of reality. For obvious reasons, the actors remain in costume but not in character. Or, not exactly in character; for it

[1]Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Anchor Books, 1954), p. 92.

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often happens that an actor, if not the entire cast, will deliberately retain traces of his role, as in the continuance of mannerisms, or *lazzi*, for comic effect (comedians, as we say, are "always on stage"); or, in heavier plays, a general gravity of mood in which, say, the actor who played Hamlet remains vaguely Hamletic beneath a "house" smile. But this is taken by both audience and cast as evidence of the fanciful power of the play to outlast itself. As Bergson would say, it has encrusted its spirit on the actors who have just performed it. And on the audience as well. (To avoid a set of irrelevant problems, I am assuming throughout a combination of ideal conditions: the perfect production, the most receptive audience, one of theatre's most engrossing plays.)

There is also an unintentional, and far more "interesting," sense in which the actor remains in character—or, to put it a better way, the character remains in the actor, like a ghost. It is not at all a clean metamorphosis. The audience does not forget Hamlet just because the actor who "imitated" him now takes a bow in his own right for having done so. What we see now is not the unvarnished actor, fresh from Hamlet, but the real side of the Hamlet phenomenon. Hamlet's character has simply been suppressed, as you might suppress a skill, or a temper. Conceivably, Hamlet might pour forth from the tap, on cue. In fact, looking naively through a psychological crack in the theatrical sham, one might even suspect that the actor's performance was an open display of a hidden, or at least a possible, self. Doesn't the playing of Hamlet, after all, require a dredging up of a Hamlet from *somewhere* within? Or, let us say that in giving this unique embodiment to the text the actor (as Camus once suggested) has now annexed Hamlet, like a colony, to himself. For it is part of the myth of the actor that each role is a kind of conquest, or permanent acquisition, that swells his holdings and leads eventually to a famous face. We do not think of an actor's portrayal of a role as being sealed off in the past tense, but as floating in a past absolute, as if it were, like the role itself, outside time. Not only is it preserved in the communal memory as part of "the history" of the play, leaving its imprint (for a time) on the text, but due to the repetitive element in all style, remnants keep popping up in the later work of the actor. For example, certain mannerisms of Olivier's Othello—the darting glance, the emphasis on certain kinds of values, the deft economy of gesture—remind

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one of the "younger" Hamlet. Of course, this is only Olivier repeating himself, but it is Hamlet who is fleetingly remembered.

I am hardly suggesting that any of this passes through an audience's mind during the curtain call. These are simply attempts to ground our perception of lingering character in subliminal extremities. The mysterious bonding of actor and character always implies a slightly supernatural achievement. Who else but the actor is privileged to live life at such speed and intensity? Who else but the actor—the only honest hypocrite, as Hazlitt said—can become a great person by pretending to be one? Here, of course, we are back on the subject of the actor's fame. Because we know him only as a stylization, a portable aesthetic object, we imagine that his real life is qualitatively a continuation of his life on stage: he leads the plot of a life, free of tedium; all of the routine necessities—eating, sleeping, driving to "work"—are simply omitted, as in a play. Even his character we imagine as a vague concoction of roles. In short, our fascination with the actor is something of a romantic "crush" that transcends sexual lines (though the best illustration of the idea is Othello's seduction of Desdemona through the witchcraft of a partly invented life). As a consequence, when we see a great actor on stage there is always a slight element of disbelief. We know that it is Olivier, for example, who is playing Hamlet, as advertised; but there is a considerable gap between the myth of Olivier and the real actor on stage. There is no satisfactory way to account for why Olivier has left the important business of leading his ideal life to appear *here*, in the flesh, before this cross-section of local theatregoers. Surely there are ideal audiences elsewhere, outside time, in what we somewhat parochially call "the world beyond." But for any theatre audience—privileged, as the cinema audience is not, to see a "live" performance—there is no moment in which the actor is more ambiguously real than when he emerges from the play and bows to us at this unstable border between two contradictory realms. He is "one of us" and yet as he stands "in borrowed robes" he is full of the allure of fiction. Not only has he played Hamlet but he somehow contains him—as a form, or a discipline (his way of bowing, for example).

But this is to look at what passes in the curtain call through only one eye of our binocular vision. In the straightforward emotional sense Hamlet has been irretrievably lost with his death on stage.

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His story was indeed a fiction, a dream of passion, but one that has amazed the very faculty of eyes and ears. The thing we call catharsis arises, in part at least, from the fact that we can be carried so utterly into this dream by the actor only to have it come to nothing, to be purged, as the lights dim. And what we mourn is the double death of Hamlet the imaginary character and Hamlet as a possibility in real nature. It is simply saddening to think that Hamlet was a vivid lie. Here we are brought against two overlapping paradoxes of the theatre: that something so intensely real could lack the fundamental quality of the real (endurance); and that something so absolute as the history of Hamlet could be contained in a "local habitation"—technically a theatre stage—as a kind of brief seizure in the real. Hence the inevitable analogy of theatre and dream: the enacted play is, in Sartre's term, an induced dream,[2] the communal version of the dream journey to "the other reality," that private exception to the rules of the possible. The astonished question of the dreamer is: how is it possible to have been so thoroughly *within* a world that was within my own head? The return from the play world is like the awakening from the dream: it is always an abrupt fall into the mundane, fraught with the nostalgia of exile. And in this respect the living actor is our cushion: he stands before us in the curtain call as a consolation, a transition and an easement; he is not only the carnal remnant of Hamlet but Hamlet's biographer and rhapsode, one who has known Hamlet intimately in that other vanished world by way of being, somewhat literally, in his shoes. He becomes, so to speak, a *real* Horatio who has survived, at one further remove, to tell Hamlet's story. It is possible that he bows as much for Hamlet, imprisoned on the legendary side of time, as for himself.

Precisely at the outbreak of applause the fiction of the play is replaced by the fiction of manners. For instance, it is assumed that the actor will be on good behavior—congenial, if not humble—during the call. For one thing, this is the only possible defense against the numerical superiority of the audience. In other words, the actor is, in a sense, pretending that he is himself. He is seeking

[2]Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), p. 252.

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our approval (so the convention goes); or at least he has consented to accept it, like those canny politicians in Shakespeare who contrive to be called back by the crowd to accept the laurel they have seemingly not sought. In any case, it is not the moment for the actor to play Coriolanus and refuse to display his "wounds": the paint, the perspiration, the breathlessness, all the traces of having been through the role—or the role, like a fever, having been through him. Even the trace of fatigue, seen through this appreciative geniality, is in order because it suggests that this was hard work, though the work consisted wholly in making it seem no work at all. It is even appropriate that the actor be mildly embarrassed as he "stoops to our clemency" (the more insistent the applause, the greater the embarrassment). He is (so the convention goes) out of his element: performing *Hamlet* was one thing, facing "all those people" another. This is the fiction of the modest actor, and the fact that the modesty may be sincere makes it no less a fiction during the curtain call; for the modesty in this case is grounded in the fact that modesty in real life is a prized virtue, nowhere more so than among the famous. Here we touch on a larger sociological truth. Around the edges of this honest submission to convention there is a faint reminder that we like genius to exhibit some minor human weakness. Einstein was a mediocre violinist; had he been a great violinist, as well as a great physicist, we would have found and cherished some other weakness (ideally, an occasional carelessness in lower mathematics, as Hemingway is rumored to have got poor grades in English composition). This has nothing to do with cutting genius down to size, but only with humanizing it—that is, adding to its perfection the virtue of having noticeably risen out of our world. How satisfying it is to read about actors who return periodically to their home towns, work "behind the scenes" for public causes, or remain married to unknowns, often for life. So it is natural that there is nothing more warmly received during the curtain call than a spontaneous disclosure of the human: a minor confusion in "places," an embarrassment over a misbehaving prop, a paternal display of affection by the star for a new actor, any sign of real, non-conventional life; in an extreme case (the norm in Soviet theatre) the actors might even applaud the audience—which translates into the communism of mutual respect and need: "Your goodness has made it possible for us to be good."

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To turn to the second question: what is it in the play, or in play itself, that authorizes this posture of the bowing actor, the eternal "logo" of the theatre? From a purely aesthetic perspective, we may say that the curtain call is the necessary self-disclosure of the illusion, comparable to the shedding of masks at a costume party. It is no contradiction of this principle to add that certain forms of theatre dispense with the curtain call altogether. For example, the closer a play comes to the religious, the less appropriate the curtain call. A play intended to bind the group together ritually, or to honor a mystery, would only violate its premise by seeking the profanity of applause. As Grotowski says, the actors are not there *for* us but *instead of* us. As a rule of thumb: in any play in which virtuosity is upstaged by mission—as in committed political drama—the curtain call is likely to be omitted or reduced to a perfunctory bow.[3] But in most theatre, the curtain call is a functional part of ending psychology. Without it, or without something like it, there remains the unresolved chord of the play's aesthetic causality. It is not a matter of confirming that *Hamlet* has been played by actors but of treating the senses to the conclusion of a known process. Aesthetically, the true ending of theatre is not the passing of the stage illusion into the *et cetera* of its own after-plot ("Go, bid the soldiers shoot." *Exeunt marching*), but the ending of play itself. Hence the curtain call is a means of dramatizing the all-but-forgotten truth that art has only used nature, as a parasite uses a host. The portraits in the mirror have all been an excuse for a display of the mirror's remarkable powers. It is true that we knew this all along, but the presentational basis of theatre rests upon a double pretense: the play pretends that we don't exist ("the fourth wall convention") and we pretend that the play does ("the willing suspension of disbelief"). So it is always a pleasant shock when the actors emerge from the wings, called by our applause, and stand before us unmasked, as themselves, villain and hero hand in hand. The stage is suddenly a stage, the costume a costume (work clothes), the actor's bow a modest admission of virtuosity; *Hamlet* was, finally, insubstantial—a text, no more, on which one might practice this art of transcendental hypocrisy.

[3]Conversely, in the great virtuoso forms of stage art—opera, ballet, plays produced in the "star" era—it is quite natural for the curtain call to erupt internally after each aria, *pas de deux*, or soliloquy. Here it is no violation of the illusion to interrupt the performance because the story is less an illusion than a display case for a series of demanding solo variations.

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From this standpoint, we may define a play as an exercise for realizing the possibilities of the actor. The genius of the playwright rests not in his knowledge of the human soul, or human nature, but in his knowledge of the actor as an instrument, the idea being that any instrument should be used fully, from its lowest note to the top of its compass, as the efficient cause of virtuosity. And since the actor happens to be a human instrument, not a piano or violin, it follows that his virtuosity is best expressed in exercises that require him to be human to the *n*th degree. Hamlet is not simply a complex character, in the psychological sense, but a complex set of demands made on the gestural genius of the actor. It is true that when we applaud the actor, we mean that he "became" Hamlet well: we were moved not by a performance but by the illusion the performance signified. But we also applaud him for successfully passing through the treacherous pitfalls of a text calculated to press him in the extreme. Virtuosity is not simply skill but skill displayed against odds which, when mastered, become "beautiful passages." Thus a dramatic classic is a series of traps, one long danger. The danger in *Lear* is located exactly in its beauty. What actor has ever approached "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks" without knowing that he must become a sublime tempest without exhausting the reserve needed to scale the mountain of verse to follow? What actor has ever approached the "solid flesh" soliloquy—Hamlet is finally *alone* on stage!—without knowing that here, in one speech, he confronts Hamlet's awesome range and depth, the pitch pipe of the entire character to which the court-scene asides were but preface and promise? Hamlet's own advice to the players about "natural" acting, suiting the action to the word, implies a temperance in the delivery that is ultimately aimed at putting the actor, as a real stranger, at home in the unreal world of the play. One might even say that the text ceases to exist when it is "naturally" spoken by the actor, but exists too plentifully when the actor "mouths" the lines. Thus, the actor-character teeters constantly on the verge of catastrophe—that is, of becoming a real toad in an imaginary garden. Actors refer to this as "falling out of character," a highly expressive metaphor for this sudden entry into the lower, or non-absolute, world of the audience.

It is no wonder that we have the cliché of the egotistical actor. If we are amazed at the phenomenon of the shy actor it is only because it strikes us as a behavioral oxymoron. How is it possible to

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be shy when one has so deliberately sought the attention of the world? It is not necessary to defend the proposition that there are more egotistical actors than funeral directors or postmen to see the truth in the cliché. It has nothing to do with vanity, or with showing off, however much the actor, above others, may be lured to these shallows by the rewards of his profession. The egotism of the actor expresses itself categorically in the simple fact that he risks the stage. To venture into this realm of massive personalities is to ask boldly to be compared to Hamlet. In this realm, his ego could not possibly be one that puffs itself visibly, for in the theatre there is nothing worse than vain acting. If anything, the actor's appearance before the world is the essence of tact and selflessness. He succeeds to the degree that his ego is thoroughly "laundered," as the politicians say, by his project—the assumption of another ego. If the role is a constant danger it is also a perfect shield behind which he disappears and reappears as an incarnation. Even his personal imperfections (a long nose, a thin voice) are left behind—that is, converted into the "givens" of a unique characterization. By contrast, what is so offensive about the muscle-man (at least to those outside the circle of the art) is that he comes to us, as Nietzsche says of the primitive conqueror, *bare of pretext.*[4] His body, the product of an extraordinary discipline, is put to no use: it becomes nothing else, it presents nothing beyond its own grotesque possibilities. And because there is no pretext, no shield, the muscle-man's display is the incarnation of vanity.[5]

Yet, just as there is a ghost of the role in the actor's bow to the audience, there is the ghost of a vanity in his performance. It almost seems that one can detect in the characterization a super-consciousness that could be nothing other than the actor's consciousness of his own self-sufficiency as he moves between the opposed zones of the illusory and the real, *vraisemblance* and *vrai*, seeming and being—between Hamlet and what of himself he has allowed to be displayed as Hamlet. It is not a statement made by the body or the eyes, but an intentional edge in the performance,

[4]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), p. 220.

[5]To be fair, there is a sense in which the vanity of the muscle-man is itself a "role" conventionalized by the audience's demand for stunning poses that show off the body to best advantage. This kind of contrived vanity is carried to the extreme in television wrestling where ego and mock-brutality are virtually interchangeable.

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signified by the aura of style, or by the submission of the body to a certain rigor, or absence of excess, that relieves the most naturalistic performance of a complete realism. It is something that could not be found in nature in any other form than the form of art, allowing, as Shakespeare's Polixenes says, that if the art "does mend Nature . . . , / The art itself is Nature."

Among Kierkegaard's aesthetic writings there is a splendid sentence that perfectly describes this hovering ego of the actor as the role passes through him—in this case through *her*, since the model in question is a Danish actress who, in Kierkegaard's view, had played Shakespeare's Juliet to perfection on the Copenhagen stage at the age of thirty-four. "Not only does she take the author's words correctly off his lips," Kierkegaard says, "but she gives them back to him in such a way, in the accompanying sound of her playfulness and the self-awareness of her own genius, that she seems to say in addition: . . . Here is the original you were trying to copy."[6]

How can we imagine the actress as seeming to say this as she speaks the playwright's line? By what audacity can she steal his line and call it her own? Again, it seems important to avoid any suggestion that she does this visibly or by winking, so to speak, from behind her shield; or, moreover, that her "aside" contains the slightest insinuation of smugness or superiority. It comes simply, as Kierkegaard says, with being "in the right rapport with the tension of the stage." It is at once a solidity and a buoyancy; it is what her art would say, if art had a voice. What it seems to me that Kierkegaard truly expresses here is the actress's creatural awareness that she is the theatre's natural and only conduit. She is the original of the poet's "copy" in the sense that she grants it an existence. To expand the idea along more phenomenological lines: the poet may have conceived the words, but insofar as they are true they are borrowed from nature; they are what he heard as his imagination listened to the world. To this degree, all dramatic texts are hypotheses, yearnings. The poet records his vision of the world as an imitation of a conceivable truth. And behold, the ac-

[6]Søren Kierkegaard, *Crisis in the Life of an Actress and Other Essays on Drama*, trans. Stephen Crites (London: Collins, 1967), p. 77. Actually, the text of the actress's sentence in the translation reads: "Let me see you copy that." I have substituted the "paraphrase" the translator suggests in his Notes (p. 131)—"Here is the original you were trying to copy"—because it seems to me far richer in its implications. If Kierkegaard did not say this exactly (the Danish reads: *kan Du gjøre mig det efter*), one could certainly derive it from his portrait of the ideal actress.

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tress appears and validates his vision, as nature validates the vision of the physicist by behaving naturally. To the poet, she is living proof that he was right about the world; to the audience, enthralled by the illusion, the poet's copy seems to have fallen directly out of nature, though it has really fallen *into* nature in the form of a demonstration. One might say that in becoming Juliet the actress has thrown herself into the gap between the hypothetical and the real.

In this light, the ancient association of actor and prostitute is justified: the actor consents to be used; one text is the same as another. This has nothing to do with a promiscuity of taste or an indifference to the size or quality of the role, but with the fact that all roles make the same demand on his person. Osric or Hamlet, it is but two dishes to one table, the same act of self-displacement carried out, as Kierkegaard says, under "the prodigious burden" of "the weight of everyone's eyes." Here, perhaps, is the true source of the sacrificial depth of playing, or at least of the more general truth in Grotowski's idea that the actor is not there *for* us but *instead of* us: the actor is someone "like us" who consents to serve as the channel through which the poet's art can be brought out of the realm of imitation and briefly detained, for our narcissistic pleasure, in the realm of being.

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ALICIA OSTRIKER

The Pure Unknown

At this time every year I speculate:
What thing, what virtue makes September weather
more pure, more elevating even, than what

happens in April, when crocus, hyacinth, clover,
maple and hickory buds are emerging like babies,
sticky, from their stiff mothers?

The fact of the matter, I admit it, is
this full and gorgeous foliage I have admired
is about to burn and die, yet happiness

makes my step brisk, makes my head
seem independent of the neck and shoulders, clears
the lungs. It is definite as wood,

and maybe the thing is like reading *King Lear*
or *Crime and Punishment* when I was seventeen
and knew nothing of despair,

but shivered with tragic bliss, being keen
to race through walls, to experience all
conceivable human passion,

to be a broken man, while still a girl?
Or later, at eighteen, the levitation
reading Aquinas, the immeasurable feel

of a towering leafless forest at entrance, or Dante
Canto One, the system of the world
about to be made plain

to me once and for all?
Is it, in fact, the virtue of the pure unknown,
boldly announced, through clear air, like a bell?

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RICHARD COLE

Recovering in the Sandwich Islands

Gentlemen, it was during my late fever
That I noticed the entire Unitarian compound

Reduced to the pure forms of geometry: irradiant
Rooftops and parallelograms still faintly tinged

In purple like the halo on the bloodless orchids
That amaze me every morning. I found

That there is nothing to fear, that thought
Is a passion like everything else, and yet,

In my conversations with Mr. Kalanimoku,
I cannot tell him exactly where passion leads.

It is his wife, I think, that leads a procession
On the anniversary of their reluctant lord's death.

Outside my window, a New England whaleboat slowly sails
Down Water Street, impressed on the faithful shoulders

Of twenty retainers. In it, the fat queen sits,
And cannot help but be beautiful,

Though she looks through the men beneath her
As if they were blind.

Something has been lost, says Mr. Kalanimoku,
And thinking I understood, I told him

The story of Jacob: "I shall not let thee go,"
But he only looked farther away, at the ocean,

Slowly crushing a soft rope of hibiscus

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Like tissue, and he is right.

I will never find in his words that anguish
Which is the mark of true conversion,

But I can teach the children the laws
Of true proportion and symmetry, their faces

So intense at times with intelligence becoming
Human that you finally understand their beauty

With a feeling torn slowly out by the roots
Of an enormous sadness, though you don't feel sad.

Aubade

Between one dream and another
The grave eyes open, and morning clouds

Slowly gather together their bright bones.
The house still ticks with sleep.

All night there have been giants in another country.
The minute I move, they stop and turn

White with listening. Years from now
They may reemerge, blinking in daylight,

Shrunken with honor and old relations
Of topaz and blind fish, but today

I lie here awake, watching the way you sleep.
All around us, the sky rises toward heaven,

And three oranges rest normally
In a china bowl.

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J. B. GOODENOUGH

Excursion

I think it is green there,
Or it was when I was a young man,
Enough room for a small town
That had no plans for growing.

And the frost heaved up my father's stone
—Or was it my mother's?—
The first winter, and it lay on
The marker of the little sister who died,

Who never lived long enough
To become attached to her name,
Whatever it was. Blackberries
Or perhaps elderberries grew

Outside the stone wall. They say
I should go berry-picking again,
Should go back there. But I think
This is not exactly what they mean,

And it is hot, being summer, or
It will be soon, and the road is dusty
And I had something else in mind,
Or I thought I had.

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KATHRYN STRIPLING

Elegy

"All the good times are past and gone
and Darlin' don't weep no more."
—Appalachian folk song

Again it's the night of the shivering stars
and ice sprouting under the hooves
of the cattle my mother says
she counted while she was driving
to town where he lay turning cold
as the stiff grasses. (How many
cows, I asked years later. Twenty-one,
she answered. Twenty-one cows huddled
under the sad moon.) He died on my birthday
at three in the morning, attempting to go
to the bathroom one last time
alone, the official Deathstory,
but I don't for one word of this goodbye
lyric believe he was not
bound, like any brave Grandfather,
out the back door where a man ought
to take his last piss, aiming
straight at the bull's eye of darkness.
He lifted himself to his full height
and strode two miraculous steps. Maybe
three, like a poor country boy walking home
on a night such as this, singing "Darlin'
don't weep no more." How her tears must have shone
in the moonlight until she reached up with the hem
of her apron! Tonight I'm that girl
left behind who has sworn she will not weep
one pretty tear more, though the autumn leaves
fall from the trees like his hands
to the cold bathroom floor and tomorrow

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I wake up another year older.
Again I have drunk too much brandy to mourn
for the bare feet on which he set forth
like the man Our Lord bade simply
take up his mattress and walk
away, praising each step of the journey.

DAVID BROMWICH

On a Picture of Echo and Narcissus

"And Cupid's there, with all his arrows spent!"
But still his torch is burning in the shade,
A flush, warmed across a darkening pool,
Or where the pool might be to claim the look
Of Cupid posing with the broken pair,
A little weary of his mastery:
Echo, propped on her elbow, now at rest
With all she dreamed of open to her eyes
Because Narcissus mocked himself asleep,
His curving form upon the curving stone.

Oh, Cupid is too young even for Cupid.
Echo alone has wisdom for this watch,
A pledge of distance with a double sound.
For who would keep the vigil of Narcissus?—
Though daylight lingers in his ample gaze,
Ever in flight, ever the same repose.

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LINDA BIERDS

Guide in a Glowworm Cave

Everyone has sung here: Dame Nellie Melba, Gracie Fields,
the Vienna Boys Choir. All scuffling down the stairs
just like you, with the river gnawing beneath the planks.

Just look at this limestone cathedral, this organ,
its smooth, white pipes. I swear when you sing
those pipes will hum it back. And the Wedding
Party. See how the bride kneels against the rail.
Each year she bows a little lower, as water drips,
and the priest slopes over his blessing.

I know you're cold, but those aren't icicles
over our heads—they're roots. And this is their earth
we are under. In time they will reach these planks.
It will be like walking through a harp then,
and then it will all close over. But now

to the boat. Don't make a sound. I'll pull us along
by a rope on the ceiling, through these black tunnels
of water . . . and there they are: a million tiny lights:
a heaven, of course, the warm stars.

Sometimes at night when I bring the boat back
I reach up and touch their foodlines, like eyelashes
on my fingers, and I think of those worms reeling in,
taking a midge and my salt into their tight mouths,
and I sing out one sharp note and watch their lights
sheathe over. It's beautiful then. That note
humming around these walls, and just a hundred worms
still glowing out the Dippers, the Milky Way,
and so close I'm almost there.

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ALISON TURNER

Cobble Hill

Leaves overhead like hands
that have rubbed against each other for warmth,
now opening, feel out,
the way we feel the dark for its geography.

That day there were too many words, my affinity
struck with the squirrels he never cared for. He frowned.
Listen. The boom of grouse, its rhythm unwary
but licensed, protected by certainty;
what is determined, what is
not chosen. I thought

I heard it. I wanted to. I kept up,
close on his heels, but there was no track
I could follow without trespassing.

Then somehow he missed the trail. Because the light

that was left got caught in the trunks of birches?
A map would draw color to its shadows, any path
narrowing to a crease, would emerge again beyond the rock
whether or not the rock was indicated.

But we blundered obliquely downward, each step
a tearing loose of stubble and vine,
each step misplaced, yet the only one possible.
He promised we were not lost. Once I fell
in the soft crumble of a fallen log,
and once a large bird lifted ahead of us.
As though there were a clear path, it found its rhythm
easily, some secret of breath and weight.
For a moment I too was skimming.

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Maybe he meant to happen what happened.

We were soon out and he brushed the twigs from my clothes.
The shadow of the hill curved back along the road
we followed towards town. He was cupping
the air, warming it on his breath.
I remember the sharp odor of the cold,
our footsteps,
everything else quiet.

Nightwalk

Even in the dark there is this sense of trying on.
What's happening could in the next moment
be unbuttoned and slipped off. As if we could see
on and on, we might say a night like this
hides nothing. Except there, a thin white line of surf
fumbles at the edge of where we step. Or eventually the moon
forces through a slit of cloud, something short of light.
We can make out the others now, almost upon us,
coming in pairs, then passing. But let's imagine instead
what this place would be like in broad daylight,
Memorial Day, for example, or the kind of Sunday
you take for granted in August. Picnics.
Countless poses in the camera lens. Someone looks up
from his book. That's us setting a claim
in orange beach towels. Every turkey sandwich
is shot through with sand. That's us by the water,
our feet tender, our shoulders twitching after gulls.
On such a gorgeous day it's easy to imagine
we could find ourselves in the same bed at the same time
and I will be saying what I meant in the first place.

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CHARLES W. MILLARD

Edward Hopper

BORN IN NYACK IN 1882, Edward Hopper first pursued his bent for art in the last year of the century when he enrolled at a school for illustrators. This draftsman's training was followed immediately by more rigorous studies in illustration at the New York School of Art, where Hopper also studied painting with Chase and Henri. His earliest drawings are shaded with long parallel strokes and occasional cross-hatching in a style reminiscent of that of such turn-of-the-century artists as Charles Dana Gibson. Soon, however, Hopper started to favor charcoal over the more precisely linear pencil or pen and ink, and his drawings began to explore rich variations of tone. The contours of these charcoal-rendered figures, often self-portraits, were not infrequently squared off in a manner recalling that of such illustrators as James Montgomery Flagg. Although conventional, the drawings were accomplished and deeply felt.

During the same period that his drawing was developing toward freedom and maturity (1900–1906), Hopper's painting was devoted almost exclusively to dark-valued, monochrome-appearing figure studies, many of them also self-portraits. These were inevitably bust or half-length compositions and were worked out tonally around a black ground, clothing—which occupied the majority of the canvas and provided the white accent of a collar or shirtsleeve—and the modulating flesh tones, accented with red, of the face. Their spirit very much reflected the dark-valued realism of the Eight, and suggested close affinity to the tradition of Eakins. Broadly brushed but not impastoed, they were small in size, although not always in scale, and projected an unpretentious homeliness that may be seen as typical of American art of the period.

In 1906–07, Hopper made his first trip to Paris, to be followed by others in 1909 and 1910. These were decisive for the development of his art. His first Paris paintings were small architectural subjects, presumably of the building in which he lived and its immediate surroundings. Although still dark in overall tonality, these pictures tend to be lighter and more transparent than the immediately preceding American works. They are characterized by shallow, carefully delimited spaces and by a certain amount of coloristic adventurousness, particularly in the form of brick reds that enliven the browns, grays, whites, and off-whites in which they tend to be worked out. Particularly handsome is a scene of a stairwell with a flight of brown stairs rising at the left, its treads defined by long, thin strokes of white, a landing at the top, geometrically defined by the rectangle of a door, and the well of a descending flight of stairs to the right, masked by a railing that curves up and across the top landing to tie the entire composition together. As a whole, the composition is a simple yet sophisticated statement that evidences substantial pictorial abilities and a developed sense of abstract arrangement.

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1907 was a year of artistic revolution for Hopper, during which he seems to have discovered Impressionism as a style, and landscape (or at least cityscape) as a subject. His canvases became substantially larger, generally measuring two by two and one half feet, and horizontal in format to match the horizontal layering of his compositions. Those compositions tended to be views of the Seine arranged in three parallel bands, river-quai and building-sky, or river-bridge-sky. They were worked out in light, close-valued tonalities, with grayed blues and greens predominating and occasional touches of brilliant red-orange. The least modulated of them coloristically and tonally were Whistlerian in effect (*Point du Carrousel in the Fog*). Quite un-Whistlerian, however, was Hopper's increasing use of impasto and of an obvious and discontinuous facture that suggests Monet or, from time to time, Van Gogh. Although impressive for what they attempt and for what they say about Hopper's artistic ambitions and his willingness to experiment with new effects, these pictures are not regularly better than his earlier efforts. They suggest that he was not entirely at home with atmospheric effects and lack of value contrast, not to mention compositions from which overtly structural anchors were absent. The best of them deal with these difficulties in various ways. *Le Parc de Saint Cloud*, for instance, is held in place by the horizontal accents of three trees that disappear beyond the top edge of the canvas, their shadowed trunks not only providing considerable value contrast to the sun-drenched lawn and sky but almost Mondrian-like vertical counterpoint to the otherwise unrelieved horizontality of the scene.

By the time of his return to Paris in 1909, Hopper had begun to integrate the lessons he had learned in New York with those he had learned abroad, and hints of the mature artist had started to appear. Turning from the natural phenomena of the city to its buildings, Hopper created compositions of greater complexity in which quais, bridges, and buildings were compressed into relatively elaborate pictorial structures organized around a play of light and shadow across angled architectural surfaces. Value contrast thus reappeared as an overall organizing element, and although highlights darkened and darks lightened in a move toward tonal integration, there was still a forceful interplay of lights and darks discretely defined by the intersections of structural planes. In *Le Pavillon de Flore,* the background building is immediately juxtaposed with a shadowed foreground structure (a boat anchored in the Seine) to collapse space and give continuous, coherent, and contrasting structure to the composition. *Le Pont Neuf,* on the other hand, is smaller in scale and more complex in structure, its numerous elements of quai, boats, bridge, and buildings elaborating a composition from which diagonals are largely absent. In both pictures, space is collapsed and the picture plane as crowded with incident as realistic representation will allow. By contrast, *Valley of the Seine,* said to date from 1908, is almost completely unsuccessful, playing to most of Hopper's weaknesses. The picture attempts to depict an atmospheric distant view in which nothing predominates except a brilliantly white aqueduct at the left. Coloristically unsubtle, clumsily modulated, and largely without atmosphere, the painting goes hard and dry and was

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clearly an attempt to deal in effects that were basically unsympathetic to the artist.

Having discovered both sunlight and himself in Paris, Hopper spent the second decade of this century consolidating his gains in the United States. During those years, his brushwork became more integrated, toned down from the painterliness of his Paris explorations but livelier than his earliest technique. At its best, it tended toward long strokes following the (increasingly geometrical) forms of the shapes it was describing. Hopper's color became richer, generally more mixed and composed of vibrant off-hues, but occasionally more saturated. Overall, his compositions moved toward increasing delineation of form and benefited from the clarity given by bright sunshine. The planes brought out in architecture by such sunshine were the elements around which his best pictures were organized, and those planes came increasingly to be distinguished not only in terms of tone but in terms of hue. Several pictures painted at Gloucester in the summer of 1912 are particularly notable in the progress of this consolidation. In *Tall Masts, Gloucester,* the vertical pilings of the shadowed foreground are played off against the masts above and behind them catching the sunlight. Between the two, the tonally contrasted horizontal shapes of boats' decks and the broad planes of a shed fill in and close up the pictorial space. Despite the fact that the picture is an outdoor scene—indeed, a sort of seascape—natural elements are almost completely suppressed, appearing only in a small and partially obscured view of water and coast at the right. The sky, which would otherwise occupy an inordinate amount of the canvas, is kept under control by the web of rigging and masts, some of them reaching to the top of the canvas, spread across it. *Italian Quarter, Gloucester* is considerably larger-scaled, although on a canvas of the same size (Hopper continued to favor the two by two and one half foot proportions he had discovered abroad). Dominated by a house in the middle distance, the slightly diagonal recession into depth suggested by the street into which one looks is stopped by a building at the end of the street emphasized by the red of a box on a telephone pole at that point. The various buildings depicted extend up to or beyond the top of the canvas, and their rectilinear forms are echoed in the rocks strewn across the foreground. Lights and darks are subtly distributed throughout the composition, the lights darkened slightly by their mixed tones and the shadows lightened by being made transparent, neither effect detracting from the overall play of contrasting values. The colors are the mixed—in this case yellowed—greens, mustards, and brick reds of which Hopper was such a master. They are separated, and the architectural forms delineated, by edges of contrasting hue and value. By qualitative contrast, *Sailing,* of 1911, fails to hold together in large part because it presents only one non-geometric form against a vast extent of sea and sky, and *Yonkers,* of 1916, is weakened by a crumbly, finicky facture, by the failure of any element or color area to dominate the composition, and by too much atmospheric blue.

Exceptionally, Hopper produced a marvellous group of small scenes of

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the rocky coast at Monhegan Island sometime during the years 1916–19. In the best of these, sky is suppressed and the view is taken sharply downward toward the coast and sea. The sea's blue is often a rich, apparently unmodulated hue, and its extent generally contrasts effectively with the play of light and purpled shade on foreground rocks. Brushwork is open and liquid to the point of occasionally detaching itself altogether from the forms it describes, and their coloristic richness gives these little pictures extraordinary conviction and force. At once luminous and opaque, they provide a touchstone by which all of Hopper's subsequent landscapes can be judged.

Although the human figure had almost entirely disappeared from Hopper's work during the decade prior to the First World War, it made an appearance in an extraordinary work painted in 1914 entitled *Soir bleu*. Six feet long by three high, this picture depicts what seems to be a carnival scene, with six figures seated at tables across the extent of the canvas and one standing. The entire scene is set against a blue ground divided horizontally into a darker lower zone and a lighter upper one, and the figures are held tightly within their narrow foreground stage by a balustrade that runs behind them. The forward edge of their space is delineated by a broad vertical stripe, apparently a column, that divides the canvas about one quarter of the way from its left edge. There is considerable spatial ambiguity—is the table at the left in front of or behind the column, for example, and what precisely is the relationship of the standing figure to the balustrade?—an ambiguity enhanced by the relationships among the figures themselves. Two have their backs turned to the beholder, two are seen in profile, and three—one in clown's makeup—are seen full face. None seems to relate in any way to any of the others, and only one, the standing figure, looks at the beholder. The carnival overtones suggested by the clown costume and the Japanese lanterns across the top of the canvas are belied by the immobility and impassiveness of the figures. That very impassiveness is crucial to the success of the picture, however, and the figures become objects arranged in a tightly constructed space, their formal relationships of infinitely more importance than any psychological relationships Hopper might have wanted to establish among them. Thus, at a moment when the human figure seems not to have interested him greatly, Hopper brought off one of the most difficult achievements in painting—a large, multi-figure composition—but only by using his figures as if they were objects.

Beginning in the early twenties, the figure reappeared regularly in Hopper's work, generally alone. Much has been made of the almost Surreal isolation in which his people have been seen to exist, and a great deal has been written about how they embody a loneliness inherent in American life. As a consequence, Hopper has not infrequently been described as the poet of the sterility of modern life. The painter himself always denied this, insofar as he talked about his art at all, and, indeed, the more one studies the pictures themselves the more one realizes that figures are present in them not for sentimental, nostalgic, or "expressive" reasons, but as

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a means of forestalling the extreme abstraction toward which his art tended and which he seems always to have resisted. Whatever personal associations individual figures may have had for him (and it is by no means impossible that, for example, the bowing clowns in his last painting may have had ironic overtones of his own bowing out), it is clear that their pictorial function is almost always ambiguous and frequently detrimental to the quality of the works in which they appear. At times, their ambiguity derives from their uncomfortable scale relationships to otherwise unified compositions (*Pennsylvania Coal Town,* 1947). At times, it derives from their intrusion into a composition in which they seem altogether unnecessary (*New York Pavements*, 1924). But almost always they convey the impression of being artistic vestiges in which Hopper had only residual interest. It was as if he could not accept the pictorial starkness of the unpeopled compositions that best suited him, or could not believe that "empty" compositions could be as good or as ambitious as figural compositions, and introduced the figure as a means of alleviating these supposed problems. The esthetic expendibility of Hopper's figures is emphasized by the fact that they are least bothersome when seen from extremely foreshortened angles or from the back—when, that is, their human identity is most suppressed. Moreover, figures introduced movement, or the possibility of movement, into compositions otherwise dependent for their strength on immobility, and Hopper was often at pains to keep them as still, one wants to say as rigid, as possible. Still as they may be, however, his figures do not seem to want to be received by Hopper's compositions, which, one senses, would often be improved without them.

Related to the pictorial unease produced by the figures in Hopper's paintings is a development that had already announced itself in the artist's Paris works, but which became particularly noticeable during the 1920s. Space became extremely compressed by being wholly sealed off, as in interior scenes, or by the use of angled views (*Apartment Houses,* 1923), or by the middleground being dropped out, juxtaposing a foreground structure directly with elements in the background (*From Williamsburg Bridge,* 1928). These spatial elisions suited Hopper's interest in architecture, as well as the anti-atmospheric tendency of his art, and his pictures are generally strongest when they are most apparent. Increasingly, also, he came to rely on changes in hue or value, not infrequently provided by sunlight and shadow (*Sunlight in a Cafeteria,* 1958) as means of relieving the pictorial burden placed on architectural elements pressed toward the surface of his canvases, and of lightening and enlivening his compositions.

Throughout the twenties Hopper refined his art, giving it the typical shape by which it has become known. His brushwork became ever thinner and more relaxed, perhaps under the influence of the watercolors he had started to produce in quantity, which were at their best when they approached the opacity of oil. Occasionally, he introduced delicate textural variation by knifing his paint onto the canvas. His colorism became increasingly rich, depending on broad overall contrasts of hue and

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value, developing subtle variations on those two elements, and, in general, relying more and more on the off-hues of which he was master. Space became more compressed and structure more apparent, as a shallow three-dimensional geometrical abstraction took possession of his art. When he went wrong, he tended to become caught up in atmospheric effects—as in some of his sailing pictures—to let his brushwork become crumbly, or to try to represent amorphous forms or forms in movement (*The Bootleggers,* 1925). He could also let his color become too saturated and, by juxtaposing ill-assorted hues, fall into coloristic vulgarity, although that vulgarity might be redeemed if the picture were simple enough in composition and sufficiently opaque (*Railroad Sunset,* 1929).

By the late twenties and early thirties, Hopper was at the top of his form. *Freight Cars, Gloucester* (1928) exhibits his coloristic mastery across a range of warm hues—red-browns, ochres, etc. Tightly built up from the foreground grass (which is rendered sufficiently as a unit to make its amorphous presence pictorially viable) through the railroad cars and houses that are its main subject to the steeple and telephone pole that anchor the composition vertically to the edges of the canvas, its forms are clearly outlined by a low sidelight. Hopper's compositional and coloristic strengths were always favored by such light, which casts strong shadows and sharply defines the angles of structural elements. On the strength of such successes, and others such as *City Roofs* (1932)—a tight, geometrical composition also worked out in off-reds and ochres—Hopper ventured the largest pictures he had yet painted or, indeed, was ever to paint. The finest of these is *Hotel Room* of 1931 (60 by 65 inches), a broadly composed picture in which a shallow diagonal space is inhabited by a human figure entirely in scale with its surroundings, a rounded and harshly green chair, and a few personal belongings. Objects and a figure that might otherwise be intrusive are subsumed into the whole by the strength of the overall composition and the luminosity of the colorism, a non-atmospheric luminosity in which shades are thinly brushed over one another to give resonance. The powerful abstract vertical of the wall defining the left edge of the canvas holds everything in place, and the picture is a marvellously successful example of how thoroughly Hopper could triumph over his weaknesses when his strengths were brought fully into play.

Although there is evidence, partially cited above, of a weakening in Hopper's art during the late thirties and early forties, his later years, from the end of the Second World War until his death in 1967, were generally a time of happily realized accomplishment. Continuing to refine and simplify his means, albeit slowly and with great subtlety, Hopper tended to paint in somewhat larger formats than those to which he had been accustomed, perhaps in evidence of his sense of his own mastery. Surfaces become broader, pictorial elements fewer, and compositions more frequently arranged parallel to the picture plane. This, along with an increasing tendency for represented elements to disappear beyond the edges of the canvas, gives a feeling of breadth to many of the later works. *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963) both exhibit these

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trends, and suggest how powerful Hopper's work could be when it was at its simplest and devoid of the human figure. Both depict shallow interiors inflected by the geometrical fall of light through an opening (a door in the earlier picture, a window in the later). Both are highly abstract, and, indeed, one finally realizes that Hopper was essentially an abstract painter of great power. Given his generation, temperament, nationality, and training it would have been difficult for him to have made the leap to pure abstraction, as Picasso had threatened to do before him and Gorky and others did after him. But every inclination of his artistic being carried him toward a particularly rigorous geometric abstraction, embodied in the subtle color structure of which he was uniquely the master. The reticence of his art and its continuing homely subject matter mark Hopper as a provincial American painter, but one of the highest order who helped maintain the older traditions of American art throughout the period of its revolution by Cubism. Himself transformed early in his career by French painting, he nonetheless kept his conservative artistic faith, demonstrating in the process how independent artistic quality is of politics and fashion and how completely a creative sensibility must remain true to itself, whatever it adopts from outside, if it is to realize itself successfully.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Nicholas de Staël

AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS by Nicolas de Staël was on view last summer at the Grand Palais in Paris.[1] Though in some respects the selection was injudicious, it included exceptionally beautiful work from every year between 1946 and the end of de Staël's abruptly, sadly concluded career.

One peculiar feature of the exhibition is the way in which it invited periodization. On the one hand, I believe that this is a result of certain decisions made by the organizers. Any periodization, after all, is a hypothesis to be implemented, which dictates certain exclusions and inclusions. On the other hand, I cannot avoid appealing to the pattern of development visible on the face of the exhibition in order to describe the paintings. The period-scaffolding, however, whether I have invented or borrowed it, exists only to serve the paintings.

The earliest paintings (1946–48) are answers to questions concerning abstraction posed not so much by de Staël himself as by the Parisian school with which he was associated. Generally, the works are crowded, kinetic and dark. A surface agitation of curved and straight lines, suggestions of shallow planes, closes back on itself, knotting and whirlpooling over a shadowy depth which draws it backwards and threatens to engulf it. Like radiation in a black box or fireflies in a jar, the trajectory of the artist's hand and of the quick unstated object is caught in an encompassing prison of darkness and the picture frame. There is no place for the eye to rest in such thickets of spirals and skew lines, nor is there any avenue of escape.

One of the most powerful of these early works is *Composition en Noir* (#10, 1946, Kunsthaus, Zurich, Association des Amis zurichois de l'art) which consists of interlaced curves, black on black, Heracleitus' flux doing time in a painted cell. Glimmers of red and olive relieve the somberness and, asymmetrically disposed on the upper right hand, two thin white wedges appear which resemble light thrown on the ceiling of a dark room when the door has been opened just a little. These paintings are prisons, then, and the door is ajar: de Staël dedicates one of his 1948 canvases, a prison increasingly luminous, increasingly rationalized, *À Piranese* (#23, 1948, Sonja Henie-Neils Onstadt Foundation, Norway).

All through 1948, the agitated lines thicken and slow down, lose their curve, shorten and become rectangles. The knots dissolve; the blunted lines range themselves in parallel and seek the vertical or horizontal. (The progression of these paintings reminds me of the Genesis mosaics on the porch of St. Mark's, Venice, where the flux of chaos assumes an order and

[1] May 23–August 24. Organized by the Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou.

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becomes the world.) The colors lighten into that grisaille, beige, cream, pale green, pale blue which de Staël afterwards so often employs with growing subtlety and assurance. *Composition Celandon* (#28, 1948, Musée des Beaux Arts, Dijon, Donation Granville) is a pleasing concatenation of bundles of thick pale blue, pale green lines, ranged five or six at a time in parallel.

The paintings from 1949–50, with their increasing clarity and simplicity, can only be called cosmological, for they attain the comprehensiveness of worlds. Worlds, that is, in the classical sense, for they are composed of a small number of elements (often no more than half a dozen) and their order arises as each element finds its proper place. No other elements are required or possible, and there are no empty places.

The greatest of these, I believe, is *Composition en Gris* (#41, 1950, Private Collection, Paris). But it is not easy to explain how four or five grey rectangles, one blue rectangle, on a field of pastel blue-green, come to have the dignity of a world, a world, moreover, fashioned by a tranquil and clairvoyant deity. Resorting to analogy, I would say that these paintings are like walls, the ring-wall of a city or field, the foundation walls of Mycenae, those stones called cyclopean. Such walls embody unity and closure, and thus naturally serve as images of a cosmos.

De Staël's walls are archaic, one great stone laid on another, most of the structural work done by gravity. Yet their solidity is not a precision fit; between the elements there is something which corresponds to mortar worn by time into a humus for growing things—moss, saxifrage, wild geranium. De Staël's elements are almost literally slabs of paint; he loved paint, evidently, and laid it on in considerable thicknesses. Each topmost layer rests upon strata of earlier colors which show around the edges and thus form a perceptibly three-dimensional, fluctuating, multi-color boundary. Since the elements never quite meet, never quite cleanly close against each other, the tiny canyons of understrata function as complex, irregular frontiers between them. The Heracleitean flux, one might say, is confined to these boundaries and so subordinated to the stable, Parmenidean order of the whole, while at the same time saving it from stasis.

Often the underlayers are quite brilliant colors, in contrast to de Staël's dominant tones of grey or blue, and flicker like a repressed fire all around the solider mass of upper paint. *Composition* (#38, 1950, Private Collection, Paris), for example, consists of a broad Y with a second element fitted between its two branches, whose grey, black and olive are transformed by the orange underlying them into a tree inhabited by some ardent divinity.

From this point, the attainment of a luminous, breathing world-order, de Staël's painting moves in two directions, and loses none of its power as it does so. In 1950–51, he re-multiplies the elements which he had so severely reduced, but this time they appear in highly formal arrays, matrices. He extends and articulates the wall into a city (*La Ville Blanche,* #47, Musée des Beaux Arts, Dijon, Donation Granville), his foundation stones into a cathedral which is in turn an image of Jerusalem and of the cos-

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mos. The matrix of *Composition* (#51, 1951, Gimpel-Hanover Galerie, Zurich) is constructed from thick panes of paint ranging from dark to pale turquoise, always with the same complexly textured boundaries, a flicker of underlights, rust, brick, mustard, which also penetrate and mottle the higher blue. The cosmos here has become a differentiated world-system, but a system rather more like post-Linnaean botany or common law than the indexed arrays of linear algebra. It is a moving system of classification, whose elements are not fixed and homogeneous, but an arrangement of particular forms capable of transforming into something new and strange.

The second line of development privileges the horizontal more and more over the vertical, attaining an increasing repose. These paintings from 1952 are mostly seascapes of the Normandy coast around Honfleur, where so many French artists have sought the play of bright clouds which catch at that corner of the north Atlantic. Earth, water and air are the horizontal elements of blue, their layered transitions are the calm undulation of seashore, wave and cloud. In *Ciel à Honfleur* (#54, 1952, Gimpel-Hanover Galerie, Zurich), bands of pale blue and blue-green alternate with bands of black and white to produce the vast parallel ribwork of light anatomized, great expansiveness, great elation.

The poster for this exhibition as a whole is a reproduction from one of de Staël's series *Les Indes-Galentes* (#74, 1953, Private Collection), and the choice is just, for it is indeed the heart of the collection. Here de Staël's cosmology, losing none of its objective authority, turns inward on itself and becomes fully reflective.

In a room whose dark walls are panelled in green, black and blue, a nude stands before what is at once a window and a mirror, an angel and her own shadow. Her regard, leading out into the world, at the same time seeks the interior of her own reflections; she sees the dream made visible, like the angel who enters the shuttered room, shuttered vision of Carpaccio's sleeping Ursula.

The nude is composed of about ten rectangular elements; the thickness of the paint and de Staël's layering technique give her a delicious solidarity. One of her thighs, turned towards the light, is a creamy plane with a rosy underlayer, as if the roundness of her leg were a consequence of the color of her flesh. Her head is slightly bowed, though her pensiveness follows not from a single gesture but from her entire stance, and from the reflection of that stance in her shadow, the angel.

Her shadow falls against the window-frame, through which blue fields and sky appear. The angel extends his arm and the robe or wing falling from it is colored the blue of distance; the curve of the robe's border is at the same time a road leading into the blue landscape seen through the window. That distance is the third dimension of the great world extending outward from the room formally composed in two dimensions; and also the inward dimension of thought. So de Staël arrives at the strange form of our human transcendence; for we are threshold creatures, whose vision can change a window into the soul's mirror, whose reflection can

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penetrate any given framework to rediscover itself out *there,* arrayed in the objective world.

As for the paintings of the last period, I can't help but see them as a falling away, a loss of composure and vision. Most of them seem to lack any inherent principle, as if, having achieved one sort of order, de Staël could not invent a fresh one, equally sure and comprehensive. The harsh bright orange and red which dominate many of these canvases are infinitely disturbing colors, which read like a flag of danger or distress: how fragile creation is. As fragile as *La Cathédrale* (#115, 1955, Private Collection), whose white panels are overwhelmed, almost annulled by the black sky which covers the top half of the painting.

Those few late paintings which maintain their integrity offer no less somber testimony. *Grisaille* (#91, 1954, The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto Hulin Trust Company) is a *nature morte* in black on black, grey on black, where the simple forms of pots, bottles and utensils are defined by a delicate tracery of white: where the panels of background and object fail to close, the white undercoat of canvas shows through. All the power of this painting is in its puritan self-containment and economy of means. Yet it is a meditation on the shadow; as if at this point the only possibility of order remaining to de Staël entailed giving up sensuous materiality, especially the color and bulk of paint. The reduction of his worlds to such a shadowy minimum is an act from which only one other act follows: to vanish altogether.

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VERNON YOUNG

Film Chronicle: Figs and Thistles

ROMAN POLANSKI'S FILM TREATMENT of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the Durbervilles* illustrates many of the basic problems involved for anyone who believes that Hardy's novels are halfway to the motion picture because they are eminently pictorial and because, *as stories,* they are paradigms of *kitsch,* of a kind which nourished the silent movie and has not yet been altogether repudiated. How, in a screen adaptation of Hardy, do you convey the sense of duration as timeless and avoid the consequence of seeming merely long-winded? How do you achieve the actuality of place and custom while retaining the effect, peculiar to Hardy, of the events having transpired in a landscape of the imagination? A few years ago, *Far From the Madding Crowd* reached the screen and while the human relationships were convincing (at least, among the men), the metaphysical dimension was nowhere to be felt. Polanski's version, perhaps because it was shot in France instead of on its native heath, does capture much of the scenic strangeness and at the same time registers a realism of weather and surfaces: the textures of stone and wood, the atmosphere of mist and snow and sunshine and merciless distances—and the obdurate mud in which (a pure Millet shot) the characters dig for turnips. By the same token—shooting the film out of bounds—Hardy's rustics, so integral a chorus in his fictions, had to be sacrificed because, I infer, Polanski could only use whatever English actors came his way across the Channel and none had the accent of Dorsetshire. So far as the principal actors are concerned, I don't think I need insist that they were no more than adequate and that Klaus Kinski's daughter, with her edible lips, was entirely inappropriate to the person of Tess. Poor well-paid girl, she was only 19 years of age; in tolerance, we may reflect that in a few years she will be definable as an actress. But in conclusion, what above all struck me was that removed from its context of literature, worshipfully annotated by English department professors, *Tess of the Durbervilles* is a damned silly story!

If you reflect upon it, ever so little, you will note that Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate,* that alleged disaster of the season, distinctly resembles, in its schematic ambience, the world of Thomas Hardy. There is the same forced attempt to place the landscape and the people thereon beyond contingency and endow them with the universal outlines of myth. This ridiculous film (regarded plotwise) is a congeries of the American Dream and the diverse propositions which have been incorporated in that dream: the injustice of being poor, the pleasure of being rich, the advantages of an Eastern university and the nostalgia for the killer countenance of the Western frontier, the rugged individualism of the American way and the populist pathos of the exploited emigrant. I was reminded of John Strachey's verdict on Archibald Macleish. "He couldn't stand a Harvard

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man unless he was a radical, and he couldn't stand a radical unless he was a Harvard man." All the same, the concerted attack of the press on Cimino's film was far in excess of justifiable abuse, so far in excess that one suspected there was a concealed grievance behind the unprecedentedly sweeping dismissal. Obviously, Cimino is confused, juvenile and self-indulgent but that description would fit two-thirds of our movie directors today. What no one I read bothered to point out is that Cimino *is* a kind of poet, perhaps just poetic enough to be vulgar; his film *is,* every foot of it, beautiful to look at. I don't know enough, technically, of this aspect, to explain how Cimino's cinematographer maintained the consistent pastel quality of all his outdoor sequences—whether by timing, by special filters or by laboratory processing of the print—but I don't see how anyone can dismiss the magical tonality of his Western scenery as mere prettiness; in my viewing experience, it was unsurpassed. Monumentally frivolous, you may call this film, yet many of the same critics who assailed it had accepted the filthy-minded tedium of Bertolucci's *1900* and the pseudo-Marxist quackery of Malick's *Days of Heaven*; they were also relatively tolerant of *Excalibur*, one of the most outrageous travesties in the history of cinematic pretension. Pedagogues who believe that to praise junk is a sign of virility have condescendingly approved this sado-masochistic exhibition on the grounds that it "at least" returned them to a perusal of Malory which they hadn't read since first-year college. Good God, better to freshen your memory by reading the entry in your favorite edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica.*

Among other epic bores of this season was *Lion of the Desert,* a warning to the West that Libyans, no less than the Jews of *Masada,* are unconquerable and equally banal in their recital. Unlike the public-television offering, there was no single actor to offset Anthony Quinn comparable to Peter O'Toole who had delivered us from Peter Strauss. I feel sure that when Quinn heard that an aging culture-hero was needed for *Lion of the Desert,* he advertised in *Variety*: "Have burnoose, will travel!" This must be the fifteenth shrewd pagan Quinn has played since *Zorba the Greek,* all with the same Los Angeles Mexican accent. It's brave fun, though, isn't it, to twit Italian Fascism in 1981! Or you can be admired for your courage, especially in Australia, for flogging another dead horse, the iniquitous British Empire, generic villain of *Breaker Morant,* certainly the *best acted* English-language film of the year, especially by Edward Woodward as Morant, one of three scapegoats in a fraudulent tribunal during the Boer War, and by Jack Thompson as a frustrated defense lawyer. Based on a play, the structure was inevitably more theatrical than cinematic, despite the conscientious efforts of Bruce Beresford, who co-wrote as well as directed, to extend the action with flashbacks.

Perversion of justice is one of the classic themes for provoking moral indignation; the trouble is that the framework of official expedience and personal cowardice tends to be monotonous in presentation. I had the feeling throughout *Breaker Morant* that I had been through it all before, listening to other accents, all the way back to Arnold Zweig's *The Case of*

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Sergeant Grischa and Humphrey Cobb's *Paths of Glory.* Even so, I would have been dutifully compelled if Beresford had not finally insulted my intelligence. The film is finished twenty minutes before the end; Beresford apparently thought that the preceding demonstrations of British-colonial hypocrisy and army despotism were not self-evident. He muddles on belatedly with a terrible poem, "ironic" music, sundry pious quotations from official sources and a very fancy terminal shot with reflections in the camera lens—probably from the sun that never sets on the British Empire!

Hands across the sea. In Russia they order things no differently. In the recent adaptation of Goncharov's novel, *Oblomov,* the unending narrative voice implies quite clearly to his Soviet audience that the spongy intellectual hero, so removed from the life of everyday that not even a beautiful woman (hyperbole) can salvage him, was naturally a product of the Czarist regime. Under Brezhnev an Oblomov is inconceivable. The worst thing about this film is the slavishness of its invention. Very little of it is dramatized, most of it is *read to us,* with accompanying pictures which might just as well have been stills instead of ostensibly moving images. No question of counterpoint or obliquity here; the narrator tells us what Oblomov is doing (usually nothing), which we can see for ourselves, and tells us what Oblomov is thinking (not much more than nothing) while the baby-faced actor stares inscrutably into the distance. This method saves the cinematographer from exerting his imagination and absolves the actor from any responsibility for wrestling with the nuance, had he been inclined to venture! In one brief sequence, when Oblomov is supposed to be undergoing deeply Russian introspection amid the beauties of nature, the on-track speaker mumbles something about the ceaseless life of small creatures feverishly active in the underbrush. What we see is Oblomov's customarily bland profile half-hidden in some long grass.

Judging from recent encouraging examples, a few French directors, whom I had decisively or reluctantly written off, may be staging comebacks. Louis Malle is insecurely one of them. *Atlantic City* is far superior to *Pretty Baby* (an achievement requiring no great genius) but it is at last falsified by the same limitation, Malle's present inability to accept the fatalities he has initially insinuated. His subject is craftily introduced with two characteristic routines in the lives of his desperate protagonists. Burt Lancaster, once a big-time gambler, now a small-change dependent of an aging beauty queen, is coughing, cigarette in mouth, as he presses his necktie before descending to the streets of Atlantic City where, by one means or another, he hopes to make a fast buck. Susan Sarandon is rubbing her shoulders and breasts with lemon juice, to remove the odors of the restaurant she works in while studying, on the side, to become a first-class card dealer, so that she can get a job in France, her Shangri-La. Since Lancaster enjoys the voyeur's delight of watching her ritual from his window opposite, and since she is gratifyingly aware that she is being watched, their mutual acquaintance and their destructive usefulness to one another is predictable. They have nowhere to go except in a small

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sordid circle of the disappointed and the damned. Someone, however—Malle, his scenarist or his producer—was afraid to settle for the Relentless Muse and characterization as its own reward. A sub-plot was added to keep the action boiling, with hoodlum drug-pushers pursuing Sarandon's invertebrate husband to his violent death in a vertical car park. Lancaster, who has understandable misgivings over his failure to prevent Sarandon from being beaten up by the same hoodlums, accidentally acquires a gun, turns into an avenging angel, gets away with double murder, inherits the husband's profitable "drop" and, after Sarandon has ripped him off and escaped to Paris, goes happily into partnership with the hag who has been keeping him, facing, by all the signs, a lucrative future. In short, Malle propels his actors who, like us, deserved better from him, through the lower depths into melodrama and farce, terrified by the visage of the born loser he had evoked and—who knows?—terrified by the prospect of waning box-office receipts.

This time around, Truffaut tried harder than Malle. *The Last Metro,* in my opinion, is his best film since *La Peau Douce.* For years he has wandered in one limbo after another, searching for an authentic subject-setting. Here, he is home again, in Paris under German occupation, with a film in which, arguably, the symbolic design dominates probability. Lucas Steiner, formerly a Resistance leader, supposed to have fled the country, is in fact concealed in a cellar beneath the stage of the theater where his wife continues to act. No one save the wife and a few confidants knows he is there. From this oubliette he follows the progress of his own play in rehearsal and communicates crucial suggestions to the company by way of his wife. By this means he persuades Mme Steiner and her leading man to intensify their love scenes, hence driving his wife into the arms of the actor, an impetuous Casanova forever ready to convince himself that his infatuations are genuine rather than sententious. This, at any rate, is the central involvement; from it many ironies, pleasant and unpleasant, develop in the form of antithesis or analogy: theater and politics, theater and off-stage passions, loyalty and betrayal (conscious and unconscious). In the play we see being rehearsed, then performed, the formal nature of the dialogue is a charming euphemism for the emotions revealed or suppressed in the Occupation atmosphere where treachery and impending arrest are daily consequences.

Previously, I have deprecated the beautiful presence of Catherine Deneuve because her reactions seemed to me uninflected. In the focal part of Mme Steiner she conveys unusual authority. (My only reservation is that under the circumstances, while often apprehensive and on occasion vehement, she never seems *tired* enough!) Fittingly, the end of the film, insofar as it sums up a sardonic triangulation, is left ambiguous, like an unresolved second act in conventional drama. Truffaut's strongest point has always been his belief that in matters of love nothing ever works out.

"America does not exist. I know. I have lived there." Herein is couched the meta-social tone, you might say, of Alan Resnais's dazzling film (scenario by Jean Gruault), *Mon Oncle d'Amérique,* an invention so inordinately

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artful that it makes Truffaut's admirable attempt to hound the ironies appear by contrast pedestrian. (I am astonished to find myself praising, almost without reservation, a film by Alan Resnais whom I have been pointedly traducing for fifteen years.)

The *essential* progress of this film's multi-linear presentation is the overlapping of three biographies; those of Regeneau, a second-rank business executive, married, Catholic, conservative (played by Gerard Depardieu, the hulking lover in *The Last Metro*); of Jean La Gall, a successful favorite of the Ministry, also married (Roger La Pierre); and of Janine, a free-lance, Leftist career girl—actress, designer, secretarial adjutant, what-have-you—(Nicole Garcia, a lovely newcomer). None is better than he should be; each is on the make in his own protective way, their separate destinies coinciding and eventually merging. Before the epilogue in which frustration stalls the power game or neutralizes romance, Janine has been the mistress of one man, the unwitting procecutor of the other and is left stranded with a third, a colder fish than either. This tragi-comedy of errors and improvised repair is not unimpeded, as it runs its triple course from birth to the penultimate embarrassments. It is intercut with a profuse succession of images from zoology, as Professor Henri La Bort, on track, benignly lectures us on the determinisms we have acquired by evolving our "reptilian" brain into the complex nervous component we now possess, the author of all our agony. (Nothing is said for the aspirations we have earned or the creative super-structures we have achieved. If you find the fashionable premises of socio-biology too much of a good thing, you will welcome Kenneth Bock's recent *Human Nature and History: A Response to Sociobiology*. Meanwhile, go along with Resnais's film and the professor's somewhat cynical insouciance. It's all much funnier than it may sound!) Resnais's visual testimony is an intermittent gallery of creatures whose instincts we have transcended (reef bacteria, shellfish, frogs, rats and a wild boar), except in those moments when self-esteem is blocked or action is required, the nature of which eludes the resources we have imperfectly stored from intellectual traditions. At this juncture we rave, we strike out, we become paralyzed, or we attempt suicide (all of which we see the characters in the film enacting). Yet another level of mockery is introduced by abrupt inserts of clips, principally from the films of Danielle Darrieux, Jean Gabin and Jean Marais, as if to say that the passions and resentments of the "real-life" people are histrionic recalls from the crises of movie idols. This device was not, to my feeling, consistently effective; it became arch and it was increasingly unable to vitiate the emotions we were being instructed to discount. In general, however, the double reference to theory and to empirical waste or ecstasy is an impressive trick, comical where it is not disturbing. (And the director of *Oblomov* should be foremost among its admirers!)

Within the boundaries of the human narrative, the masterful feature is the surprising appropriateness of the *settings* in which the several episodes take place. Notable is the painful showdown when Janine and Jean, revealing an awful truth to one another, wade absurdly in water to their

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thighs, between two islands. Perhaps Resnais needed Gruault's scenario to provide him with places on the earth he had heretofore been content to approximate.

If it is necessary for me to conclude this review with a guiding message I managed to extricate from Resnais and Gruault's tour de force, I would locate it in the professor's suave observation that we develop our mind in order to dominate others: not too remote from a single assertion by D. H. Lawrence which I have long respected without question—that fundamentally all our relationships are based either on love or on power. Wear this lightly as you see the film, which is not so much an unmitigated thesis as it is an uncommonly exalted entertainment, superbly constructed and smilingly told.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

The Year Push Came to Shove

WHEN TWYLA THARP'S BALLET-À-CLEF about American Ballet Theater, *Push Comes to Shove,* had its premiere in 1976, the company was heaving with internal dissension and outward disarray. The ballet described this condition and also suggested a way out in the surpassing appeal of Mikhail Baryshnikov. With the force of his personal charisma and dancing genius he seemed to sweep all rivalries, confusions and excesses under a carpet of intentional hilarity. We couldn't know that five years later something more than a superstar would be needed to rescue the company from complacent mediocrity, or that Baryshnikov would again be charged with the job. Tharp's new version of *Push*—she's rearranged about two-thirds of it—is cleaner, clearer, less competitive. The company has gotten into line; the ranks are more clearly defined; the ballet is still funny, but we're laughing more with the company than at it. Baryshnikov is still sensational; other dancers may share his spotlight, but he still reigns supreme.

Baryshnikov's tenure as artistic director of ABT was still in its first year when the company played its spring season at the Metropolitan Opera House. This is a very short time to make an impact. Although ballet dancers' careers are unnaturally short, the life of a ballet company is expected to be long and it changes imperceptibly. Dancer by dancer, ballet by ballet, the elements are replaced, reseeded, and it may take years before you notice that it isn't the same company you thought it was. It's probably an indication of how badly ABT needed firmer direction, and also of the quality of Baryshnikov's leadership, that he has already effected some important reform of the repertory and upgraded the standard of dancing. Beyond the immediate results of these efforts, at season's end we had some idea what kind of identity the company may go on to fashion for itself.

The most visible segments of the ABT repertory, the old nineteenth-century standbys, are still very much in evidence. At least half the eight-week run was devoted to performances of *Swan Lake, La Bayadère, Don Quixote* and *Giselle*—although *Giselle* was downplayed by programming a curtain-raiser ballet on the same bill. The rest of the slate had undergone some cleansing and freshening. The larding of bombastic modern ballets has been thinned out. Some of the melodramatic American story-ballets have been dropped, and there were fewer of those flashy but mindless pas de deux that hype the stars. Although no new choreography was presented, seven ballets new to the repertory were staged, every one with real choreographic value, taste and challenge. Several of the classics were either partly or entirely restaged, indicating a rather significant reorientation in the way ABT is going to view the nineteenth century.

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Baryshnikov's own version of *Don Quixote* (1978) is a good example of his approach to classicism. Rather than reconstruct the original Petipa work, with its elaborate plot, characters and scenics, Baryshnikov slimmed down the ballet to a virtually nonstop series of dances linked together by a few strands of story. This reductive pattern resembles the methods of some contemporary Soviet choreographers, although Baryshnikov's dances are classical in style and not overly tricky. What you get is a sort of orgy of virtuosity; dancing without the expository clutter or ceremonial fluff that can slow up the classics. This really only works when the choreography is detailed enough to substitute for the visual and emotional variety that's been omitted, or when the ensemble displays a convincing succession of dance-energies, as it does when the phenomenal Baryshnikov galvanizes the entire *Don Quixote* cast into a mood of euphoric celebration. The third-act divertissement from *Raymonda,* newly staged by Baryshnikov with gorgeous costumes by Santo Loquasto, provides this contrast in its alternations between classical and folk-like dances. The *Jardin Animé* section of *Le Corsaire,* a piece I don't think has ever been done by an American company, presents the corps de ballet in evolving floral patterns. The choreography shows off their precision formations and the changes in scale that result from different subdivisions of the large group and two female soloists.

Baryshnikov now seems to be embarked on infusing a contemporary spirit into those lynchpins in Ballet Theater's reputation as a ballet-museum, *Swan Lake, Giselle* and *Sleeping Beauty.* Unlike other remountings of these classics, which try to tell the fairy-tale stories with modern psychological verismo (Baryshnikov's *Nutcracker* is an example), these updatings seem to be going toward the same kind of streamlining we see in *Don Quixote, Jardin* and the new *Raymonda.* In often subtle ways, all three classics have become more dancey. The stage looks cleaner minus the customary throngs of milling peasants. The action moves more swiftly and there are fewer switches into the slower rhythms of mime or panoramic transitions. Dancing is showcased for what it is; other things that compete for our visual attention are being minimized. In *Swan Lake,* there are no longer any hunters accompanying the prince and getting in the way when he encounters the flock of swans. In Act III the Black Swan arrives and the prince rushes out for a tête-à-tête with her, leaving the court—and the audience—to give its undivided attention to the divertissement.

Small gestures like this accumulate over the course of a season, to convey an understanding that the ensemble is important, not merely some sort of contentless filler for the spaces in a big ballet where the stars don't appear. Beginning with *Don Quixote* Baryshnikov demonstrated his faith in the corps and his respect for their abilities as accomplished individual dancers. I think the featuring of small clusters of corps women must have influenced the choice of the *Jardin Animé* revival. A pretty ballet as well as a change of pace, *Jardin* gives the corps a lot to do and makes opportunities for its members to be seen instead of always being submerged in identical ranks. Not only does the ABT corps look more correct and animated

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now, people with faces and names are beginning to impress themselves on the mind.

The sense that there are dancing personalities in the lower ranks is a major factor in building audience loyalty for a ballet company. For the first time in years there are dancers in Ballet Theater's corps that I look for in the crowds, follow in small roles—Peter Fonseca, Dierdre Carberry, Michaela Hughes, for instance. Perhaps there have been interesting dancers at this level before, but below star status the company has looked depressed and indifferent.

Baryshnikov's theater intelligence has also begun to exert itself over the repertory's warhorses. Without changing much, he's added moments of suspense, tightened and focussed action that used to seem slow. Most effective, I thought, was the opening of *Swan Lake* Act II, an empty stage with its lakeside backdrop and the ground covered with fog. As the orchestra completes the prelude, a black shape moves in the fog, and the magician Rothbart rises up like some monster from the deep. Not only is this an improvement over Rothbart's usual entrance later in the act—stomping out from the wings and trying to look menacing—but it sets up the idea of evil and the supernatural that's supposed to dominate the action.

A superb actor and comic himself, Baryshnikov seems to be encouraging more acting motivation in the dancers. Mime coach Alexander Minz has left the company, taking his wooden-Indian style with him, and the general quality of all the characterizations seems to have been influenced by two ballet mistresses: Georgina Parkinson, who works in the large, musical English mime style of her home company, the Royal Ballet; and Elena Tchernichova, an exponent of Russian demi-character work. There's some overacting—Ronald Perry tends to mug, for instance—but, as with the dancing, the faces look more alive, the dancers seem to be thinking about where they are and what they're projecting.

All the ballets added to the repertory provide some extension of the company's dancing range. Though it proclaims itself the major American repository of historical styles, ABT has been more or less fixated in the Russian classics, a few choreographers of the 1940s, and the jeté-and-contraction modernistic genre exemplified by Glen Tetley. The pas de trois from August Bournonville's *Guards of Amager* (1871) is, I think, the first example of the great Dane's work that ABT has offered since the *Flower Festival* pas de deux, which was used to show off stars like Erik Bruhn and Carla Fracci in the days before we appreciated the particular choreographic niceties of Bournonville. We know them now, after the Bournonville centenary last year, and they were handsomely demonstrated in this revival, staged by Stanley Williams. Peter Fonseca, with Lisa de Ribere and Cheryl Yeager, caught the clean, understated brilliance of Bournonville step-making.

Understatement is implied too in Frederick Ashton's *Les Rendezvous* (1933), a very early and key work in the development of English ballet. Yet the most effective of the three performances I saw ABT do was given

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by Gelsey Kirkland, who redeemed what had seemed cloying to me by giving authority to the merest gesture. Ashton in a picnic mood can be prissy and overrefined to the American eye, and *Les Rendezvous* is nothing but niceness—a series of meetings and perambulations in a park. It's the kind of ballet where the length of the women's gloves is determined by their rank, and where things like handshakes and wagging fingers are a part of the choreography. Kirkland found an approach somewhere between blandness and camp that made me realize why American versions of this kind of ballet usually look so cute. Our dancers tend to underplay what must seem naive to them, and end up looking self-conscious anyway. Kirkland performed the affectations—wrist flips, head tosses—with the same large assurance as she did her real dance steps. I found myself thinking of her as a queen, at least a queen of the garden party, and giving more credibility than I might have to a waltz variation in which she kept turning with a twist in the body, so that some part of her always seemed to be changing direction before the rest of her finished, or continuing the line of the turn beyond its actual completion.

Two ballets representing either end of the Diaghilev era were added to the repertory, Vaslav Nijinsky's *Afternoon of a Faun* (1912) and George Balanchine's *Prodigal Son* (1929). After years of doing the naturalistic dance-dramas of Agnes de Mille and Antony Tudor, the dancers accommodated very well to these much more radical, nonrealistic styles, especially Robert La Fosse, who showed a fine instinct for character in *Prodigal Son* as well as in other roles. Abstraction is not a specialty of Ballet Theater; indeed, very little of its repertory can be called revolutionary or even extremely modern. *Faun* with its flat, archaic sensualism, and *Prodigal* with its grotesque, expressionistic visions of corruption and forgiveness can be important instruments for broadening the audience's horizons.

A later Balanchine work, *La Sonnambula* (1946), is less unusual technically but makes tremendous demands on our sensibilities. It's possible to look at this ballet on the surface, as a ballroom-cum-divertissement attraction with a surprise ending no more unlikely than the death of Giselle. But once you stop to puzzle about its dissonant and arhythmic happenings, you're swimming in darker waters. Before I saw Baryshnikov play the poet in this season's revival (I missed him when he performed it with the New York City Ballet two years ago), the only clue I had to the strangeness of the piece was the critic Edwin Denby's observation that it was about the alienation of the poet from society. This comment intrigued me for years and made the ballet seem even more perplexing.

As the piece opens a party is in progress, hosted by a baron and a coquette, his mistress. A young man, a stranger, enters and stands, for one of those portentous still moments you see in a ballet sometimes, waiting to be introduced. He refuses to shake hands with the host, stares at the coquette until she's presented to him. Perhaps she had met him somewhere else and casually invited him. The baron leaves, and the poet and the coquette dance, becoming passionately attracted to each other. He makes a strained attempt to join the party's coarsely elaborate dances, sits apart

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with the coquette paying no attention during some rich and rather tasteless entertainment dances. Then the party goes in to dinner, leaving him alone. A mysterious girl appears, flits across the floor. She doesn't seem to see but holds a lighted candle. The poet is instantly captivated by her, pushes her, turns her this way and that, places himself in her way. She doesn't give any conscious sign of recognition, yet she does his bidding, steps around him, as if she sensed his presence and could play his game. Finally she glides back into the house and he follows, as if now he's under her spell. The guests return. The coquette, who has caught a glimpse of the poet and the sleepwalker together, jealously reports their meeting to the baron. Drawing his knife, he rushes through the door where they've gone out. There's another anxious pause, and the dying poet staggers in. The sleepwalker, still unconscious, perceives what has happened. Some of the male guests lift the poet and place him in her arms; she carries him away, up into her tower.

At last I saw the meaning of Denby's remark—the sleepwalker represents not only the unearthly, the spiritual, but the beautiful; she's the poet's ideal of innocence. Contrasted with the crass society of the baron and his guests, she seems to mock the vain, hard glamour that's beguiled him before. What made me see this is Baryshnikov's ability to act being in love two entirely different ways—infatuated with the coquette, dazed and delighted by the sleepwalker. He treats one like a conquest; the other like a wholly unexpected magic toy. He makes you feel that this apparition renders everything else worthless for him. Like James in *La Sylphide,* he doesn't even consider what he may be losing when he abandons the conscious world for her.

In some ways the most important new production of the season for Ballet Theater was Paul Taylor's *Airs*. Its modern dance movement style hasn't quite been mastered by the seven dancers. They don't know how to settle into their weight, they abridge Taylor's low, sweeping gestures and sensuous transitions, they show their torsos more than they use them. But Taylor's dancey rhythms and fast jumping sections—particularly one for Elaine Kudo and Warren Conover—suit their balletic elevation. *Airs*, to music of Handel, is a most resourceful and interesting dance on the huge Met stage, while it looks only pleasantly familiar in the Taylor company's repertory. With its small cast, it divides up the space in asymmetrical ways you never see in contemporary ballets, yet it suggests order, even several different varieties of order, imposed on near-chaos. Men and women can do the same movement, can even dance together, without implicitly being lovers. The ABT audience liked the work, and even had sense enough not to applaud every entrance and exit.

Ballet Theater has for so long been a company of stars, it seems paradoxical that the company should have so little power at the top to carry it through its present transition. To me, Baryshnikov alone among all the principals was always there and always wonderful. Kirkland was an iffy quantity, as likely to be shaky and absent-minded—or simply to cancel out—as she was to be grand. Natalia Makarova was having troubles with

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an injury. Cynthia Gregory and Martine Van Hamel, both at their technical best, seemed to have calculated every effect, frozen the timing of every smile and eye crinkle, worked over every risk until it was totally safe. Magali Messac and Marianna Tcherkassky are dependable but limited in expression. Among the men, Anthony Dowell was a serious loss—injury kept him out—and the other principals suffer from either disturbing mannerisms (Fernando Bujones and Alexander Godunov) or somehow don't come across with enormous authority (Kevin McKenzie and Danilo Radojevic). Patrick Bissell has great promise and a big, plush body which he hasn't disciplined rigorously enough. It would be too bad if the company went on another of its star-import binges to fill in these gaps, and Baryshnikov seems to be trying to bring up young dancers from the ranks. This takes time, though, and requires patience from us as well as the dancers.

At the end of the new *Push Comes to Shove*, the place where the dancers used to be so unruly, shouldering each other out of the way to get the attention of the audience, they now form organized groups, team up with partners, and assert their right to be seen. Baryshnikov looks flustered by their independence but is willing to help them. This derby that's become the symbol of his top status all during the ballet gets tossed from one dancer to another. Then derbies come sailing out of the wings, one to every soloist except the star. He resigns himself to dancing hatless among them. Finally they all snap into a presentable pose as the curtain drops. Baryshnikov looks proud as punch. Who knows—Tharp has been right before.

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Reviews

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Critics on Poets

ALTHOUGH IT'S ONLY MIDWAY THROUGH THE YEAR, I think a safe bet could be made that John Carey's new book on John Donne is the richest, fullest, most intelligent treatment of a great literary figure we're likely to encounter in 1981.[1] To those familiar with previous work by the Merton Professor at Oxford, this news will come as no surprise. Mr. Carey's invigorating if irascible and sometimes perverse little book on Milton (1970) came out just after he had published his invaluable edition of that poet's shorter poems (in the Longman series). For the unfortunately short-lived Penguin Critical Anthologies, he did the one on Andrew Marvell, which takes on in hand-to-hand polemical combat virtually all of Marvell's modern critics. He then turned his attention to the nineteenth-century novel and produced books on Dickens and Thackeray (*The Violent Effigy,* 1973, and *Thackeray: Prodigal Genius*, 1977), both of them stimulating, argument-provoking work of high originality. The thesis of the Dickens book was that whenever Dickens tried to be serious, address issues, feel deeply about the human heart, he wrote junk; that his imaginative genius exerted itself only when exercised by fantasies of disorder, cruelty and violence. As for Thackeray, Carey found his prodigal genius to lie in the earlier, shorter works, whereas (with the exception of *Vanity Fair*) the later novels are virtually unreadable. In the case of both books Carey's preparation was, evidently, first to read every word the author ever wrote, taking full notes on recurrent habits of expression. Then to proceed, not book by book, but through topics (Dickens on corpses or effigies or sex, Thackeray on food or drink or buttons) under which he marshalled his evidence and drew up an argument from it. Both studies were written without footnotes, in a fast-paced, constantly shifting narrative. Dazzling, and at times hard to locate exactly where Carey was coming from, the books were largely ignored by those American academics in possession of the "field"; perhaps they were felt to be insufficiently "scholarly" (in other words, dangerously interesting). It may also be that since Carey had done loads of reviewing over the past fifteen years and now writes regularly for the *Sunday Times,* he could be written off as one more of those lively but unsound English journalists.

His book on Donne is unlikely to be similarly ignored. For one thing it has enough footnotes to satisfy the most scrupulous questioner of his sources, while its deep and varied learning is evident on every page.

[1] JOHN DONNE: Life, Mind and Art, by *John Carey.* Oxford University Press. $19.95.

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Moreover, although Carey's approach to Donne is similar to the one he used with the novelists (chapters bear titles like "Ambition," "Death," "Change," "Bodies," under which all sorts of disparate materials come together to be probed) there is a passionate centrality to his concern with Donne that was absent from the earlier books. This is probably because he is thoroughly and respectfully awed by the great, reckless, ruthless, unbounded imagination of Donne, and so is never tempted to patronize him, be clever at his expense—as he did at times with Dickens and Thackeray. His sense of admiration is wholly genuine—he really wonders at the power of this man he is investigating. But he does more than just wonder, and his own style throughout the nearly 300 pages is densely bristling with energy and implication—as befits his subject.

In his introduction Carey allows, modestly, that his book is really an expansion of T. S. Eliot's observation that Donne attached himself to various ideas because he was "interested in the feeling they give." Carey thinks this habit not peculiar to Donne, rather a universal practice for artists; but his attempt, and it is a very successful one, is to demonstrate that "Donne's opinions upon such furiously controverted issues as original sin, election, resurrection and the state of the soul after death, were generated by recognizably the same imagination as the poems about love and women." So—to mention just one instance of that "same imagination"—he begins with Donne's apostasy from the Roman Catholic church, and evokes in particular, indeed lurid, detail what it was like to have been a Catholic in Elizabethan England: "On the one hand . . . it was possible, if you were sufficiently circumspect or well-connected, to prosper. On the other hand, you might end up having your intestines torn out." (Carey provides gory documentation of this latter possibility, in case we thought he was using a figure of speech merely.) He then singles out Donne's "Satire III" which he calls "the great, crucial poem of Donne's early manhood," and finds—originally to my eyes—a contradiction between the turmoils and lacerations of its earlier parts and its later transformation of the search for truth into a strenuous mountain climb. Carey sees this brilliant trope ("On a huge hill,/Cragged and steep, Truth stands . . .") as Donne's way of allaying his personal doubts and guilts about his apostasy in a way which really doesn't resolve the earlier turmoil. But, as usual with Carey, this "contradiction" makes the poem better rather than worse: "It was, for its author, a necessary poem, and its inconsistency and misrepresentation are part of its vigorous life." From there he can turn, at the beginning of the next chapter, to the *Songs and Sonnets,* look at them with apostasy as their background, and note that the "perpetual worry about fidelity and falseness" of these poems is unsurprising, and not just a conventional device to get love poems written, but a product of the "same imagination."

At one point he says about a passage from Donne that "the voice lives." The claim should be made for Carey's prose as well, from that early sentence about having one's intestines torn out, right on through the book. Speaking of Donne's *Anniversaries* (his two long poems on the death of

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Elizabeth Drury, whom in fact he had never met), and contrasting these extravaganzas with a short tribute by an unknown poet to Elizabeth's dead sister, Carey affirms that "By comparison, the *Anniversaries* are about as touching as a brass band." Commenting on the argumentative confusions of "Death Be Not Proud" with respect to its final, proud boast ("Death, thou shalt die") Carey writes: "He stamps his foot, and plummets straight through a trapdoor." On Donne's sermons, he notes their exhilaration in the task of destruction: "The world is his prey, and he runs it down rapturously. His language responds richly to the task, fabricating abhorrent and coagulated textures for the world's decaying materials." One remembers Carey on Dickens, though he is speaking of Donne here: "When he imagines the body wounded or rotting, strength at once flows into his pen." Speaking at one point of how extremely mobile Donne's poems are, how they open themselves to new and different ideas from the ones they start with, he says that "we get the impression they are being worked on while we read them." And having brought up, rather abstractly, the notion of "working on," Carey's imagination works on it: "They have a recent, experimental feel, like a stretch of new road, where you have to edge past tar boilers and gravel lorries and men leaning on spades. Effort is still in the air, and the surface is half fluid." Again, the assertion Carey makes about Donne's sermons may be applied to his own criticism: "We sense the stirrings of a mind in the grip of its subject."

But what makes this criticism so rare and valuable is that for all his learning Mr. Carey is not merely the specialist. Time and again he moves out from the particular bit of Donne under consideration to juxtapose it with other, later writing. Defining the way Donne uses "I" and "me" in his poems in a way that "will not allow the reader to appropriate them," the critic goes to "Tintern Abbey" and the ease with which we imagine that we are the "I" speaking. While looking at Donne's attitudes toward change, flux, the destructiveness of life, Carey brings in Pater as another writer who saw reality as "something continually being snatched away from [him]." In the chapter called "Bodies," in which Donne's interests in the organic, in the anatomy of the body, are discussed, Carey finds it altogether natural to move to Aldous Huxley, and not just to Huxley generally but to an especially apposite passage from *Those Barren Leaves* (which an Elizabethan scholar couldn't be expected to have read) in which Mr. Calamy lectures a woman on the kind of existence possessed by one's hand. Carey then compares the cohesiveness of Donne's vision to the fragmentariness of Huxley's, and the reader feels that both writers have been seen more clearly. All in all, this is a book that makes you want to sit down and read Donne for a month, then read through Carey once again.

At various times over the past few years, I've made a feint at "keeping up" with criticism of Browning (it is of course impossible to keep up with Browning) but have found it useful mainly, I'm afraid, as a foil to my own classroom teaching of individual poems. All too often his admirers become so enthusiastic about how "real" are his invented characters, that

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it sounds as if "people" like Johannes Agricola, or the Spanish cloistered monk, or the Duke pointing out his last Duchess's portrait, were fully equipped human beings with motives and feelings and a complex inner life who might well have written Browning's poems. With this naive emphasis on how real the characters are, goes a corresponding disregard of the master illusionist himself, "Old hippety-hop o' the accents" (as Pound called him). A pity since, particularly in Browning's case, the strategy and tactics by which he keeps things animated and moving are everything, and repay attention when our simpler delights in "characters" (or it may be distaste, as when Santayana deplored his "vulgarity" and "perpetual vagrancy" and accused him of mistaking the world for a boarding-house) have faded. Now Herbert Tucker has produced a patient, closely-argued reading of Browning's relatively early poetry (the last poem he considers is "Cleon," published in *Men and Women* in 1855) which is the most sophisticated and passionate defense of his procedures as a poet that I'm aware of.[2]

The book takes off from the commonplace we all learned in school about the "infinite moment" (discuss, with reference to three poems) in Browning's work—what Mr. Tucker refers to as the "moral doctrine of incompleteness." Tucker assumes, sensibly, that this doctrine has its analogue in Browning's poetics:

> From the formal effects of its largest structures to the minutiae of its verbal style, Browning's is an art of disclosure, an art that resists its own finalities. He typically prolongs the curious action of his longer poems and his plays through strategies that defer and thus continually anticipate what another author might make the narrative or dramatic climax.

He goes on to describe the effect of Browning's "closure" (a word I'm learning to live with, especially since Tucker plays it off against "disclosure") as "like a force temporarily compressing a spring that remains tensed for further speech," adding that such tension is also located in Browning's reader. Indeed it is, and may also have been called by us, on one or another occasion in our attempt to read Browning, frustration or dissatisfaction. "Addicted to anticipation, Browning was a perpetual and knowing beginner," says Tucker in his introduction, and he acknowledges Harold Bloom and Jacques Derrida as critics to whom he stands in debt: Bloom for his inquiries into the "dynamics" of a poet's disagreement with tradition; Derrida for his notion of *différance* (meaning both "differ" and "defer") as "the process of representation whereby language displaces and postpones indefinitely the verities it ostensibly signifies." Tucker's deference to Derrida enables him then to take a further step by punning on "defer": "Browning's characters tend to place themselves in secondary or deferential postures; by deferring to their ideas or to each other, they de-

[2] BROWNING'S BEGINNINGS, by *Herbert F. Tucker Jr.* University of Minnesota Press. $22.50.

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fer to the future and thus heighten the climate of anticipation in which Browning's poetry thrives." This has the merit of not only being clever, but true—as anyone who recalls his favorite dramatic monologue will agree.

Moreover, despite the employment of that hermeneutical vocabulary which strikes terror into some of our simple hearts ("closure and "figuration" and a couple of "sublimes" but only one "recuperation") Tucker does not sink under it into the mechanical. He recognizes, to his credit, the "formidably dispassionate" (another word would be cold-blooded) nature of deconstructionist procedures, and he hopes to give them some "human resonance" by actively charting the kinds of "temporal deferral and moral deference" which go on in the poems. Whatever deconstructionist theory doesn't believe about the "self," Browning believed in it, believed in the possibility of creating character-in-action. So like Browning (and like Bloom, incidentally) Tucker resists the move that would reduce everything to figuration, to "tropes," and holds out for the "imaginative construction of compellingly self-conscious personalities." These constructions take place in time, drawing the reader out and on, making poems "whose meaning is in their motion."

But it should be emphasized—or at least this reader must emphasize it—that giving oneself to this motion (going with the flow?) is not invariably a moving experience, in the vulgarized sense of that word. Tucker himself remarks, with regard to Browning's early and lengthy *Pauline,* that it is both "inspiriting" and "exhausting" in the way it "postpones fulfillment to the future and so replenishes the present with the energies of anticipation." In fact readers of *Pauline,* of whom I count myself as sort of one, sometimes become dispirited and exhausted, the book falling nervelessly from their hand as they move off someplace else. Evidently that doesn't happen to Tucker, whose inventiveness and resourcefulness as a reader never appear to flag; thus he can, without apology, spend the first two-thirds of his book on the Early Browning—the poet of *Pauline, Paracelsus, Sordello* and the dramas (are you still with me reader?). The last section of these 148 pages deals with *King Victor and King Charles,* and is subtitled "Tortuous Dealing," which title—with no offense to Tucker—could fit the necessary way that a critic who would write about these early long poems must proceed. If you are willing to take the time and reread (for most of us I suspect the word is "read") all or any one of these poems, Tucker's dealings will be found to be illuminating and precisely focussed. For one thing he is an excellent verbal critic; his purely aesthetic comments on rhythm and sound and image are penetrating, far above the usual kind of thing we get on Browning. But I confess to having difficulty sustaining myself as a follower of his analyses over the individual long runs of the respective poems, and I suspect it's because I don't have the patience for quite so much deferred gratification, however deferential.

Therefore it is the book's last third which I, and perhaps other readers, find most rewarding. Here, beginning exactly where one should begin—

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with "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," Tucker performs a series of useful and enlightening readings, of "Artemis Prologizes," "Home-Thoughts, From Abroad," (the first time I've seen anything made of that lovely poem beyond gushing over "Oh to be in England"), "Picter Ignotus," "Johannes Agricola in Meditation," "My Last Duchess," "A Toccata of Galuppi's," "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and finally "Cleon." One summarizing paragraph will have to serve as illustration of the kind of value he finds in *Men and Women* and in Browning's dramatic lyrics generally. Speaking of the "deliberate suspension" characteristic of them he says that

> It is the great trick of the poet at once subjective and objective, the most compelling of Victorian dramatic lyricists, to defer to the creations of his own imagination as other, as somehow temporarily real. Blake, who wrote of his own visionary forms dramatic, also wrote in one of the proverbs of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that "the most sublime act is to set another before you." Browning's creative deference to the alien power of his men and women, his setting another before him, sets the scene of his sublimely, grotesquely dramatic writing.

The best praise I can give to *Browning's Beginnings* is that it challenges the lazy reader like me who thought he had come to an end as far as reading "My Last Duchess" or "Andrea del Sarto" went. Instead Tucker shows one how they go further and differently than one had thought—so there is nothing for it but to pick up Browning and begin again.

The only reason to buy Peter Ackroyd's life of Ezra Pound, in the "Writer and his World" series, is for the world, not the writing part of it.[3] In other words, for the 111 illustrations, most of them of our hero from the time he peers out as little "Ray" Pound, sitting on the porch rail of the Wyncote Public School (c. 1895) or, now in spectacles three years later, with other cadets at the Cheltenham Military Academy—to the final years in Venice, an old man with who could say what in his eyes and countenance. He never took a bad picture, and the ones of his parents, of Joyce, of many other people and places from the gondola shop in San Trovaso (Venice, 1908) to the Disciplinary Training Center (Pisa, 1945), are equally memorable. As for the accompanying text, Mr. Ackroyd is a skillful journalist who writes briskly but whose judgments are simplified to the point of uselessness. Consider the following dictum about the *Cantos*: "His work is inevitably obscure if we do not understand why he is doing it; and the *Cantos* are difficult only if we go to them with conventional expectations about the nature of poetry." Tell it to the marines! The *Cantos* are difficult, period, no matter what "expectations"—conventional or otherwise—we bring to them. The best life of Pound is still Noel Stock's, and anybody who looks to Mr. Ackroyd's book for critical help with the poetry will surely not find it.

[3] EZRA POUND AND HIS WORLD, by *Peter Ackroyd*. Scribner's. $12.95.

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One very interesting place to go for such help is to George Kearns's recent guide, keyed as it is to the New Directions edition (largely selected by Pound himself) of *Selected Cantos.*[4] Do not confuse this book with superficial "guides" to someone's work which content themselves with identifying allusions and references. Mr. Kearns is a first-rate critic and an extraordinarily sensitive reader of Pound. His treatment of individual cantos, or parts of them, is first to give as full and responsive a reading as he can to the particular section, then speak to all its obscurities or trouble-spots. There are also welcome general discussions—of the whole project, of the *Pisan Cantos* in particular, and of much else. Kearns is widely read, and not just in Ezra Pound. He is willing to go a long ways in the attempt to give Pound the benefit of the doubt; he finds beauties where often they were unperceived by my naked eye, and sometimes remain so even after his presentation. The only fault one can find with the book is that, keyed to Pound's (quirky) selection which leaves out so much of interest from the long poem, we regret not having the benefit of Mr. Kearns on many other parts of it. He remarks in the introduction that it was "my own pleasurable bewilderment, and the sheer movement of language in the poem, that kept me coming back to it long before I had any idea of what any of it 'meant'." This painstaking and finely written *Guide* helps us with our own bewilderments by sharpening responses to those movements of language which are the *Cantos.*

[4] GUIDE TO EZRA POUND'S SELECTED CANTOS, by *George Kearns.* Rutgers University Press. $6.95.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Poetry Chronicle: Some Versions of the Pastoral

MUCH OF AMERICAN POETRY TODAY, with its lack of inspiration, power, or freshness, and with its extraordinary urbanity and finish, is like tapioca imitating pearls. Even some of our best and most widely-admired poets (Hecht, Hollander, Howard, Merrill, Ashbery) too often out-Harrod Harrod's in their sophistication. Mr. Merrill, as everyone knows, has written an occult splendor of hundreds of pages, in which he summons the ghosts of W. H. Auden and Chester Kalman. Richard Howard's last book was partially devoted to a brief theory of nineteenth-century Paris. Mr. Hecht has written on Venice, grants applications, and a ghost in a good martini. Much of Mr. Ashbery's finest poems are about poetry, literally and literarily self-reflective. And Mr. Hollander's witty and learned poems are replete with metaphors of movie-going and espionage.

This is not necessarily a criticism. These are among my favorite poets. But it *is* to say that our most visible poets write in language which is, more often than not, far removed from ordinary speech, and that their subjects are far removed from the soil. After so much cosmopolitanism, one almost longs for the bucolic moods of the Georgians and their attempts to render nature descriptions into art. If Brooke, Davies, Drinkwater, Hodgson, Munro, Flecker and the rest were sometimes guilty of weekend ruralism or sentimental pastoralism, at least their work was rooted in reality, life as it is lived, rather than in art and in life as it was long ago.

From the dozens of new books of poetry I read preparing for this chronicle, I was struck that so many of the best (and a few of the worst) were written not by imitators or descendants of our cosmopolitans but by modern Georgians. That there suddenly are so many, and so many good ones, surprises: as any academician knows, Robert Frost currently is out of fashion, and even James Dickey's recent books have been slighted.

Yet here they are, a number of poets, most of them young, most of them American, who render facts of the natural world in language which is evocative and specific, in poems which transcend the comparatively simple intention of the "nature poet" into complex visions of man in the natural world—which is, after all, the only world we have. Perhaps the supreme function of poetry is to heal the rift between man and the earth, and to connect him again to his beginnings.

One of the best of the "new Georgians" is Stephen Philbrick, whose first collection, *No Goodbye*,[1] has just been published. Philbrick takes most

[1] NO GOODBYE, by *Stephen Philbrick*. The Smith. $3.50.

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of his subjects and nearly all of his imagery from nature. His titles are indicative: "Cow Burial," "Haylike and After," "Hard Road," "Wild Horses," "Fattening Dorset Sheep," and "Clearing Briars" give you the idea. The more personal poems concern sexual love, unsuccessful attempts to father a child, the birth of a son, the death of a father and the subsequent death of a mother. These are commonplace subjects for poetry, but in Philbrick's hands the results are not commonplace poems.

There is, to begin with, his language. Philbrick often wrenches grammar to produce a startling effect, as in the lines "In the dim bed bright with bare . . ." and "The story is smack and plain and small as salt . . . " and "The cow died in braver than child bearing." Such language is almost cryptic, yet one can *see*, for instance, the *bareness* of that bed shining.

When Philbrick uses conventional language, the images he produces are usually vivid and unconventional: a populous chicken house is described as "dark and shifting as a grave of sand"; shorn lamb's wool is "rich as meat"; the land is "red as beefsteak"; a friend smiles "the way a tomato splits its skin"; the poet's sleep is heavy as "a horse's head"; a young boy escaping his pursuers is "stunned as a shotgun at being free"; the wind coughs "cold as the cracks in a coffin"; a fox's passing is "soft as a lung"; and a thief returns "sly as snow in the night." Only rarely does an image fail to connect, as it does in "Left Out"; when a row of tools is described as "dead as boys," I have to ask, What boys? All dead boys? The image is obscure. And in "A Chimney Full of Rain," one of Philbrick's major poems, he describes a heavy rain of Biblical proportions: "The sea turned upside down / and fell in scales and green whales of rain . . . " It is an audacious attempt, and in rendering the family's grief into Old Testament images, a sense of grandeur and myth is achieved. But I still have difficulty seeing those green whales falling out of the sky.

But these are exceptions. Even when words seem chosen primarily for their sound, I can almost always see what the poet is singing. For Philbrick primarily is a lyric poet. In "Death Is in Every Poem" he proclaims,

> . . . How I wanted this to sing—I'll let it go, ragged as a bat.
> Flying blind
> On sound alone. Never mind how I wanted this to sing
> —If it still talks at all, use it to walk in.

One suspects Philbrick's early influence was Dylan Thomas. Both are elegiasts. Philbrick has even written his own elegy, "Oil My Boots." Both write largely on birth, sex, and death, in images that sometimes are private. Both use words in such a way that the reader is left with the impression that a poet with a remarkable sense of language and rhythm is saying something important about subjects of importance. Yet Philbrick is much his own man. He reaches toward the epigrammatic and aphoristic in a way never found in Thomas:

> To be alone, you only need yourself.
> But to be lonesome, you have to love.

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(and)

> . . . the only thing worse than making money
> Is taking it.

These poems are as dark and nourishing as good topsoil. They remind me of Osip Mandelstam's statement: "Poetry is the plow that turns up time so that the deep layers of time, the black soil, appear on top." *No Goodbye*, by a thirty-year-old, is one of the year's most impressive first collections.

Another impressive volume by a young poet is Thomas Rabbitt's second collection.[2] (His first, *Exile,* won the U.S. Award of the International Poetry Forum in 1975.) Like Philbrick, Rabbitt's concerns are for country things—country life, violence, peace, and especially country people. Rabbitt is less concerned than Philbrick with positing the striking image—although, when he does, it works, as when the school bus comes "like a yellow slug . . . " His volume is unusual, in that each of the thirty-five poems consists of fourteen lines. Some are sonnets, as you might expect, but of these most are irregular and do not observe, either in form or in subject division, the convention of octave and sestet. The best of Rabbitt's new poems, however, are written in five-foot, pentameter lines, and it is this meter which gives them a natural movement of language as well as a graceful, dignified expression even when dealing with mean subjects:

> The old sow struggles in the cattle chute.
> A dozen men and boys stand by with prods
> To move her to the gate. Her wicked eyes
> Like slits into another world accuse
> Us all of torture. It should take one shot . . .

Rabbitt's other long suit is rhyme, which he uses subtly and well. It is a pleasure to encounter the slant-rhyme pairings of twist/hideous, wind/friend, rises/crises.

The first section of *The Booth Interstate* is an interconnected series of poems about the hard life—hard adolescence, hard farming, hard loving. Many are populated by Booths—presumably ancestors (spiritually or biologically) of the poet. These constitute Rabbitt's best work. His several forays into literary subjects are less original, as in a two-part salute to Hart Crane and John Berryman, linked supposedly by their passions and suicides from different kinds of bridges. With borrowings from their subjects, these poems necessarily are less original. Several however are sensational in both meanings of that word—as in "Rape," a gratuitously violent poem on the sodomization of a boy ending in his death. I prefer Mr. Rabbitt when he is less naturalistic, as in the sequence "Travel Toward My Father's Funeral," which fuses dream with memory with reality.

[2] THE BOOTH INTERSTATE, by *Thomas Rabbitt.* Knopf. $9.95; $5.95.

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Whichever mode he chooses, it is clear he has an original vision. His Booths of Boothtown live in the imagination like those Snopeses of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. His coon hunts and his pig kills, his chicken coops and country graveyards, are proof that the pastoral is alive in American poetry today. As one line of his "Country Roads" says, "If the cows could, they'd tell you that you're there." Indeed they would.

Jared Carter's first book,[3] cast mainly in pleasing free verses, also takes its background from a specific region, a portion of the Middle West identified as Mississinewa County, a place the poet states (in a jacket note) is "east of Spoon River, West of Winesburg, and slightly north of Raintree County." Such a statement would seem highly self-conscious, but that is exactly what the poems are not. In his citation as judge for the 1980 Walt Whitman Award, which this book won, Galway Kinnell referred to the book's lack of pretensions and poeticism. Kinnell is largely right, though I could do without certain high-blown phrases like "immemorial grasses" and "depths of your blood."

Carter displays a great deal of empathy for the things and creatures of this world. He has taken seriously Tess Gallagher's statement (which he uses as an epigraph) "For the ultimate sign of our disbelief in our own souls is our inability to believe in the souls of anything else around us." Carter writes fondly of days lost—of rituals of gathering fireflies, looking for ginseng, landing bees, shooting pool. His landscape is like a Wright Morris photograph: "In the distance there is a dog barking / And somewhere a windmill turning in the wind." Some of the story-poems remind me of Masters or of Edwin Arlington Robinson at his most ironic. There are memorable scenes in these poems: the dying man being pre-measured for his grave; the aunt who entertains in her house by the river the last time before it is to be flooded by the government; the undertaker who undertakes the moving of three-hundred-odd graves.

But it is these stories that linger, not the language in which they are couched. Carter's verse is near-naked of similes, metaphors, conceits. His language, so nearly that of spoken speech (in his case, most often breaking into octameters), at times seems too country-plain. There is almost no imagery in these poems, only description—which is why even the most original of his conceits, a poem on Depression men paid merely to give bricks in the street a quarter-turn and replace them again, falls flat. Frost once said, "Imagery and after-imagery: that is all there is to poetry," suggesting the tones and overtones which images invite. In Carter's work I miss the meaningful participation that can come when the reader is startled by an image which is highly original and yet within the scope of the acceptable comparison. When Carter does use a figure, it is not totally unexpected. A man on his back moves "like a crab"; another whimpers "like a dog." I've heard those before.

Yet no one could argue that Carter's poems are not made of the authentic thing—real experiences, deeply felt. Nothing here is second-hand

[3] WORK, FOR THE NIGHT IS COMING, by *Jared Carter.* Macmillan. $10.95; $5.95.

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or artificial. I only wish that, in writing about these ordinary people and ordinary events, Carter's language were more extraordinary.

Delacroix said, "To be twenty and a poet is to be twenty; to be forty and a poet is to be a poet." William Pitt Root is now forty, and his third book is a fully-mature, deeply-felt document.[4] Reading it so impressed me that I could not help but wonder why Root is not better known. Perhaps because his work is rural, and accordingly not fashionable?

Root's first, *The Storm and Other Poems* (1969), published when he was twenty-eight, demonstrated linguistic brilliance. He was especially adroit at finding the precise verb: coastlands would "hunch along the sea," and twigs "flinch as sparrows hop." He was very big on the pathetic fallacy. His elegant language often was at odds with his homey subjects, as when a fisherman was said to shrug "the stone-gleam of his shoulder," or when "sullen swans bask, adrift in the breakage of their own reflections."

In his second collection, *Striking the Dark Air for Music,* Root's writing went (for me) astray. Too many minimalistic echoes of Merwin, too many bones, lies and stones. So I was not prepared for the accomplishment of *Reasons for Going It on Foot*, which is a return to the powers of his first book. Root's range is exceedingly wide. There are small, imagistic poems of intricate precision, on the lovemaking of slugs in the air, and the mating of spiders, on a bat in a swimming pool, a stuffed Arctic Owl. He studies these subjects as minutely as Roethke studies greenhouse plants. Root intuits that the human spirit has much to learn from, and indeed can be nourished by, these small natural creatures. Of the owl he states:

> This is what we learn
> from him, if
> we learn at all: That he
> is dead, stuffed
> among the mystery
> of all that has been.
> Is changed as we
> are changed,
> gazing upon him.

Even the sections of Root's longer poems on human situations are, in fact, tiny Imagistic poems themselves, as this section from "Sketches of a Woman in Various Attitudes" attests:

> Your face rising
> like the desert moon
>
> above the pale tarantula
> of my shoulder

[4] REASONS FOR GOING IT ON FOOT, by *William Pitt Root.* Atheneum. $11.95; $6.95.

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as I shave

has caused me to learn
the delicate art

of carving
around a smile.

So much said, in so few words! The poem is a tribute to Jeffers, but Root's way is more that of H. D. than the garrulous poet of Big Sur. The Imagists were famous for reticence, yet Root manages to incorporate largesse in his minimalism. One long poem, "Fleshflower," is an extended metaphor and progression of images for and about the cunt. It is a risky attempt that totally succeeds. Throughout the book I am impressed by the antipodes of Root's masculinity and the delicate nature of his art. The contrast is embodied in "For the World's Strongest Man," about an Olympic Champion weight-lifter who also gardens and has developed hybrids of roses and tomatoes (which now are named after him). Root states about the weight-lifter, and presumably about himself, "What a man would grow must flourish first in his heart."

And what a big heart it is. And how American: in one stanza he encapsules the experience of living in or travelling through Wyoming:

Here in the only Chinese restaurant for 150 miles
all of us waiting for hamburgers listen
to the latest on John Wayne's open heart.

Reasons for Going It on Foot is evidence that William Pitt Root is one of our most undervalued poets.

Vern Rutsala is capable of highly impressive work. His initial book, *The Window,* was one of my favorite collections of the sixties. Many of those poems began with morning light—unwelcome, merciless, exposing. It was a book full of startling small epiphanies, such as this vision of the completion of incomplete individuals:

. . . those blond children
who, after wading, felt skin tighten and seem
to shrink and so took their puckered fingers
to garages where they oiled the hinges
of old ice boxes and then grew very cool and quiet.

The horror of the situation is manifest—but the language is controlled, understated.

The Window was followed by a chapbook and by *The Journey Begins*, a volume abounding in imagery of dust and powder and rust. Rutsala is our poet of degeneration, it was easy to say. Then appeared *Paragraphs*, an unexpected collection of experiments utilizing the paragraph as a poetic

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form. It is not my favorite of his books. Mimicking interoffice memos, dust-jacket blurbs, political speeches, vacation postcards, it attempted to use the most common language in an uncommon form. Naomi Lazard did it far better in *Ordinances.* Rutsala was so determined to be "modern," he abandoned his poetic gift for utilizing the past.

I'm happy to report that Rutsala has recovered from his infatuation with the paragraph. *Walking Home from the Ice House*[5] holds some of his most accomplished work. This is true pastoral, Georgian poetry. The poet misses his father, true. But he also misses the hated house they built together, certain nondescript backroads, a Hudson automobile, and the entire bleeding state of Idaho. Poem after poem celebrates Idaho. My favorites are "Visitors" and "Words." The former is structured upon the typical small-town belief that one lives in the Garden of Eden; if only outsiders knew they'd come and want to stay forever. This stance is shattered by the visit of the Harlem Globetrotters, whose precision and city-wise ways

> Left a strange frenzy
> No one could quite handle
> And for years after
> The town team was poor
> The boys all arms and legs
> The ball a stranger in their hands

I could argue with Rutsala about the absence of punctuation in these lines, but that is all one could argue. "Words" is an original justification for poor grammar and vocabulary by the poor. So many words name things they themselves have never personally possessed or held: "This is why we came to love / The double negative."

Rutsala is a splendid writer whose next book should be a selected poems from his previous five collections. Such a volume would, I argue, reveal him to be a moving poet of the everyday furniture of our existence.

When Philip Dacey's first book, *How I Escaped from the Labyrinth*, was published in 1977, it was apparent that he was a poet of considerable talent. That book contains, among other beauties, a 150-line poem which became my favorite of all contemporary poems on the unicorn. Not all Dacey's poems were long. In fact, one was one line long. Called "Thumb," it went,

> The odd, friendless boy raised by four aunts.

There were far more hits than misses in the collection. The misses occurred when Dacey seemed to be struggling to assimilate a voice not entirely his own. But in *The Boy Under the Bed*,[6] Dacey's hefty (100 pages) sec-

[5] WALKING HOME FROM THE ICEHOUSE, by *Vern Rutsala.* Carnegie-Mellon University Press. $12.95; $4.95.

[6] THE BOY UNDER THE BED, by *Philip Dacey.* The Johns Hopkins University Press. $10.95; $5.95.

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ond volume, there are no such misses. He has progressed from a poet in transition to one fully arrived. Whether he is writing in traditional or free verse forms—and there are plenty of examples of both—Dacey's poems are as individual as fingerprints.

The book is carefully arranged. It begins with a section called "apple-doors," about beginnings and entrances and permissions and mysteries. There is a very real poem on the disappearance of animals from a rural clearing, which closes with an invocation to the animals themselves; and a very surreal poem on rural school-bus drivers and their young charges, "who have waited all night, / alone, at the ends of driveways, / their little lunches tight in their hands."

The second grouping, "Spanish Artifacts," follows the poet from Cordoba to Altea to Alicante. They reveal Dacey's antennae always out to experience. They recreate the poetical from the quotidian. He likes getting caught in a rainstorm, because the water brings nature's colors out. A child's plastic ballpoint pen bends sunlight into a tiny rainbow, alerting Dacey to the fact that prisms wait in disguise where you least expect them —like the material of all art.

"Nipples Rise to Spirit" is a third grouping, and these follow the poet-protagonist's growth from childhood to early middle age, innocence to adultery. Among these is "Caroline Naked: A Husband to His Wife," and "One of the Boys," which carry all the suburban freight and guilt of a good John Cheever short story. There is also a fine "Hortatory" to a refrigerator, written with the affection and wit of a Christopher Smart praising his cat. I like Dacey's ability to praise the commonplace and homely, the trustworthiness of wood, a worn spot in a carpet, a circular kitchen table. As psychologically penetrating and honest as his poems of monogamy and adultery appear to be, I prefer these simple celebrations of the trappings of life, rather than those of life's entrapments.

A brief final section, "The Presence of Presence," strives toward a redefinition of Dacey's faith and his pursuit of perfection of the life and the art, and the necessity for trust's renewal. It is a strong conclusion to a wise and unassuming book.

Molly Peacock's first book[7] is devoted to recapturing the past, but for her the past is a point of reference, not an escape or a preferred world. Any reference to what has been is lashed to what now is:

> What was and a vision of what is
> walk down a long pew and meet
> on a day when nothing broken can be fixed,
> and everything is noticeably much more worn.
>
> Layer after layer of gauze has fallen over
> or layer on layer of color weathered off—
> if only the mind were a barn,
> if only a body waiting to be dressed.

[7] AND LIVE APART, by *Molly Peacock*. University of Missouri Press. $8.50.

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Ms. Peacock uses the past for instruction, and as a gloss on her own behavior. When she finds herself planting a bed of petunias, even though she dislikes them ("Petunias smell like Vicks Vapo Rub" and are "sticky, like annually half-licked candy"), she acknowledges that her dislike is a disliking for her own origins ("People often hate the flowers / Grown by their aunts and mothers . . .") This good-natured poem, then, on the nature of one's roots as well as on rooting nature, concludes with musings on growth and death, and kinds of knowing—logical, biological, hereditary and heretical.

Such ambition is evidenced throughout. Her concerns are big ones: the separations we make between one another, the reversals of love, the inescapability of fate, inevitabilities of inheritence, a concern for the language of emotion in conversation. All these come together in a notable sequence, "Alibis and Lullabies," and, to a lesser extent, in a likeable poem about what I take to be her parents' store, "Peacock's Superette." The book is notable for plumbing the past without sentimentality, and for finding new solutions to old dilemmas. Anyone named Molly Peacock *should* be a poet, and Molly Peacock is.

Nailing Up the Home Sweet Home is the unfortunate title of Jeanne Murray Walker's first book.[8] It sounds like the title for a book of old-fashioned verses by a poetaster. After reading her book, though, I discover Ms. Walker's is actually a tough and highly realistic poetry. She is wise to history, horsetrading, sports, and sex. Like the raven of her poem of that title, she wears "a well-tailored sense of irony."

Many of these poems originate in the Minnesota of her girlhood, rough country where "North still holds hail in its mouth to spit / behind the geese it sends out every fall." These lines are from a piece recreating the lives of a farm couple, with five children, whose crops have been decimated by hail storms. Yet they'll get through. Just like the peony bush which the hail failed to ruin, their lives will have a flowering. The blossom, their spirits, will not fall apart. Of all the poets under review, Ms. Walker has perhaps the finest sense of the correct poetic symbol or gesture, yet she is never heavy-handed. Understatement is her most lethal tool. When a lunch truck woman is murdered, the killer is said to have "let her go." When a composer's son dies, "a hundred measures of silence become his tune."

There is music throughout the book—not only in formal measure, but also in imagery and subject. The experiences of singing in a performance of Haydn's *Creation* and of listening to Shostakovich's *First Symphony* are subjects of two well-turned poems. In the latter she captures the modern Russian's musical imagery:

> The black whale cruises past,
> Sprouting a spray of staccato notes.
> Wise-eyed cellos
> dive and roll in his wake.

[8] NAILING UP THE HOME SWEET HOME, by *Jeanne Murray Walker.* Cleveland State Poetry Center. $4.00.

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Sea-creatures and instruments intermingle in a cartoon of vivid picture-making. (I do wonder if Ms. Walker didn't intend the whale to spout, rather than sprout, those musical notes. Small matter.) Generally her language is precise, and only on a rare occasion does she indulge herself and overwrite:

> He stayed with her until the season
> when naked trees stand out like bones
> against the salmon flesh of sky.

Other subjects are the quest for her father, building (literally) a home with her husband, academia, and re-creations of ancient myths. In an age when most poets don't attempt it, it is a pleasure to encounter this poet's end-rhymes, which never jangle or obtrude. She also knows how to end a poem. Each seems to conclude at the right point, on the right beat, as in her Penelope poem:

> Laying aside her thread
> she straightens her shoulders and
> leans into the terrible gaiety of spring.

"Terrible" is the operative word, connoting all the unknown qualities of Ulysses' return. *Nailing Up the Home Sweet Home* is a well-carpentered book.

A. R. Ammons (or one of his protagonists) says in a poem in his new collection, "How little I have really cared about nature: I always thought the woods idyllic and let it go at that . . . "[9] The statement is amusing, in view of how Ammons' work is almost always about man in nature, attempting to make the visible yield the visionary. His writing, Harold Bloom reminds us, confirms his "vital continuities with the central Whitmanian tradition of our poetry."

I could take issue with the Whitman parallel. Of course Ammons writes pastoral poetry, of the common man, and frequently achieves the mystical. But Ammons' voice and line and vision are ultimately anti-Whitmanesque. His poems are nearly always brief, his lines nearly always narrow. He does not conduct self-interviews, and he never sermonizes. Moreover, he has never attempted a real epic. (His longest poems are his lightest.) Rather than attempt to change the reader's life, he is content to report, vividly, what he has felt and seen.

This makes Ammons sound simple. He is not. Often, in the course of a brief poem, he will zig-zag wildly away from a linear thought construction (—but he always returns!). While his language is usually of the simplest kind, the poems deal with the complex. Unlike the man who sees, when he gets up in the morning, only the kitchen sink, Ammons looks out and sees "the windy rivers of the Lord in the treetops."

A Coast of Trees collects Ammons' most recent shorter poems written since *The Snow Poems* and *Highgate Road.* It contains several that rank with

[9] A COAST OF TREES, by *A. R. Ammons.* Norton. $12.95; $4.95.

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his best. These include "Swells" (which reveals his intense interest in science, as if we didn't know), "Rapids" (beginning with a case for the superiority of autumn over spring and ending in the nature of the universe 100-million years from now—all within 12 lines!), "Parting" (atypical: about a stroke victim and the illness's effect upon a marriage), "Sweetened Change" (also atypical: a Williamsesque poem on a marriage and a hospital), and "Persistences" (about man's indomitability).

In all these poems, the mind is seeking truth. (Unlike the poetry of Reg Saner, also about man in nature, but in which the mind seems to be seeking only nature.) Yet Ammons maintains his light touch. He is also, alas, capable of parodying himself—perhaps unintentionally. Any poet who has published sixteen collections in twenty-six years runs a risk of repetition, of stating a felt concern less well the third or fourth time. I'm surprised at some of the slackness of language in these new poems: mentions of "thicket sway-floats" (whatever they are) and "a band of drowse" and "the bleak land of foreverness" simply do not crystallize sufficiently to give shape to an experience.

Ammons does continue to renew the language of the tribe by making verbs of nouns: In one poem an argument is said to "thruway." His occasional tendency to sound like Frost, as in his early sand dune poem and "Visit," is repeated here in "Range," a meditation on divine order inspired by observing a spider, a poem which inevitably recalls Frost's "Design." Ammons even becomes as folksy as Frost:

> It tests patience when what you need
> is too big to handle . . .

And later,

> . . . the fine spider may go on
> living on air if need be to till this plenty.

On the positive side, in this tidy book there is less abstraction, more people, and a continuation of Ammons' explorations of light, color and radiance. It is a fine place to begin for any reader not yet familiar with this poet who is determined to capture the shape and flow of the universe and to untell its dreams.

Diametrically opposed to Ammons' vision is the poetry of C. B. Cox, an Englishman teaching at the University of Manchester.[10] His poetry is always about people—townspeople and teachers he observed as a child, companions in military service, natives seen while on lecture tours or teaching in India, Sudan, Brazil, and California. He catalogues human frailties and idiosyncrasies with compassion. When Cox isn't writing about people he has known, he imagines scenes between George Eliot and George Lewes, Joseph and Jessica Conrad, Gustav Mahler and his wife.

[10] EVERY COMMON SIGHT, by *C. B. Cox*. London Magazine Editions. $7.00.

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The trappings of Cox's poems also contrast with those of Ammons. Ammons will make a poem about a stone, a leaf, a cloud. Cox's are far more "civilized." Poems unfold inside a television studio, a hospital, a squash court. One is more likely to trip on a TV cable than on a root in the world of his imagination.

These are quiet, reflective poems, the reflections of an educated man observing the small details of daily life. The pleasure they give spring not so much from originality or surprise, but from the joys of perceiving an over-all music, the flow of linked cadences with their rise and fall, resolved harmonics and closes. In a period when many readers are less interested in the beautiful than the true, Mr. Cox attempts to produce the beautiful *and* the true. Poems like "Death of a Maiden Aunt" are worthy of study to reveal the cool craft with which it was constructed, craft which makes reading even a poem on death enjoyable. And, after all, whatever else a poem should be, it should be enjoyable.

Another reason Cox's poems please is that they are understandable. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, as enjoyment is one of the avenues that leads to understanding, so understanding is one of the components essential to enjoyment. There is not one obscure image or statement in *Every Common Sight.* The book clearly earns its title in clarity.

And yet . . . I wish Mr. Cox were more adventurous. Everything here is so remarkably tidy, so understated with such a stiff upper lip, I long for some of the wildness we witness whenever a poem runs away with the poet, carrying the poet away with it, unfolding (to quote Frost) by surprise, from delight to wisdom. Cox approaches such wildness and surprise in "Snowberries" and a love poem, "The Loire." I hope this is the direction his new work pursues.

Another English poet, Herbert Lomas, has just published his third colleciton.[11] Lomas' background is similar to Cox's: University education, military service, travel in India, lecturing in Finland and England. Like Cox, he is fascinated by the Victorians, major and minor. His work also is highly "civilized": the telescopic gun and the martini, two of man's most lethal engines of destruction, figure in his poems. Lomas is often satirical and his tone sardonic. His targets are the demolition of certain old buildings, hypocrisy, bullies, and materialism. Lomas bites off and chews more than Cox. In addition to single poems, there are nine sequences, including "Todmorden," in twenty-four sections, concerning the Pennines where Lomas was born and reared.

This sequence embraces his family, buildings in the village, local customs, schools, village "characters," and ultimately the fate of England. The family poems are the strongest, particularly "Blood," concerning his grandparents, and "Cornets and Trumpets," about his father and himself. The former casts its characters in a familial fairy tale: "My father behaved like a prince disinherited and disguised as a toad"; the latter em-

[11] PUBLIC FOOTPATH, by *Herbert Lomas.* Anvil Press Poetry. Distributed in the U.S. by SPD Inc. $6.95.

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ploys a shared talent for music and for turning down opportunities as synecdoches for what is wrong in the lives of himself and his father. It is a heart-breaking little poem:

> Brass band music on the radio's hard to bear:
> All those euphonious, sad, sweet, masculine sounds.

Here Lomas is less brittle than in many of the volume's more biting verses. There are several epigraphs by Auden appended to poems, and it is Auden's urbanity and wit which Lomas sometimes seems to have appropriated for his own, especially in "Retreat to the Sheets." His more epigrammatic couplets are worthy of Wystan:

> In an age of civil war who can still
> Say goodbye to the daffodils?
>
> *
>
> The ocean's an endlessly altering school:
> It runs in the wise and it runs in the fool.
>
> *
>
> The indissoluble ménage of economics, suffering and force
> Was never christened in this church, or their divorce.

It should not surprise, then, that in a jacket note we are told Auden found Lomas' work "original and interesting."

It was not until his fourth collection, *Goshawk, Antelope*, that Dave Smith began to receive the wide critical attention his work deserves. Who knows why some connect with a single book, others never do? Perhaps in Smith's case, it is as simple as his name. (One critic-friend of mine declared, "I could never take seriously anyone who signs his name *Dave* Smith!" "*Ben* Jonson," I replied. He looked properly chastened.)

That Smith has produced a prose book on the late James Wright seems fitting. In the American literature of longing and homesickness, of the necessity to recapture one's roots, Wright was our quintessential poet of yearning and mooning. Wright's last collection began with a recollection of a nest of red wings in Ohio decades ago, and concluded with a poem titled "Beautiful Ohio." The Ohio River was Wright's symbol for the beautiful, the sure, the American—all the antiquities of his childhood.

Smith belongs firmly in that tradition. Many of his early poems root in an anonymous Virginia fishing village. Others spring from Fredericksburg and Richmond; Cumberland, Maryland; Muskegon, Michigan; and Parkersburg, West Virginia. *Goshawk, Antelope* strayed far from his Virginia origins, to encompass allegories in Oregon, Wyoming, and several locales in Utah, where the poet was teaching. Yet one of the most memo-

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rable works in that book was "The Roundhouse Voices," a boyhood remembrance of baseball and his uncle. Highly personal, it had far more impact than some of the larger, more ambitious addresses to universal fates.

Smiths's two new books,[12] one of shorter poems, one of longer, circle back to his beginnings in Tidewater Maryland and Virginia and also restore his relatives and immediate family to the canon. Both books exhibit Smith's extravagance of language. His rhetoric resembles not so much Wright's as Faulkner's or Warren's, circumlocuting about the ancient and the holy and the unpredictable, "the heart-given lowering of a boy's body," and philosophical abstractions such as "He is only something in a dream we are the meaning of . . ." Yet even when Smith is at his most abstract, his humanity brings him back to earth. In this sense the jacket photograph of an angel sculpture, for *Dream Flights,* is more than usually appropriate: her wings are quite ethereal, but her naked body is that of a desirable earth-woman.

Both of these 1981 books collect recent work, but it is impossible to know which is the more recent. (The acknowledgements and copyright pages are no help here.) Of the two, I have a preference for *Homage to Edgar Allan Poe.* These brief poems—many complete on less than a page—seem totally successful and never rush off-center or out of control as do a few of the longer attempts. The domestic poems, like "Discovering Obscenities on Her Wall" (*her* being his daughter), and "Reading the Books Our Children Have Written," are exquisite and will touch even a reader who has never had children of his own. The title sequence, in six sections, entwines Poe's personal history with Smith's, and is a worthy addition to his family chronicles and regional studies of *Cumberland Station* (1977). And I was glad to find "Night of the Chickens, North of Joplin" collected at last (and heavily revised). It describes the drunken night drive of a character (not Smith), and the language swerves and blacks out:

> Night comes,
> your car glides like the moon's river,
> then the curves, the skid, for God's sake,
> chickens that seem to want to die, and do,
> in timeless explosions, absurdly breaking
>
> both headlights.
> Now there is only feeling
> the road, no more blundering
> through hummocks of darkness, now
> the blind crawl from houselight
> to houselight, sometimes speeding
> to trail a car that passes, the hope
> you might steal his taillight and limp in . . .

[12] HOMAGE TO EDGAR ALLAN POE, by *Dave Smith.* Louisiana State University Press. $12.95; $5.95. DREAM FLIGHTS, by *Dave Smith.* University of Illinois Press. $10.00; $4.95.

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This is the kind of poem James Dickey writes at his most audacious—as when he recreates a stewardess falling from an airplane in flight, or the soliloquy of a sheep-child.

Dream Flights publishes seventeen poems on seventy-six pages. For the most part they are dreams emanating from Smith's Southern roots. There are several involving relations between blacks and whites. Other contrasts are drawn between the innocent and the jaded, the natural and the perverse, the old order and the new, the appearance versus the reality. These include some of Smith's most personal poems, "The Tire Hangs in the Woods," "The Pornography Box," and poems to his wife on the dangers of marriage and breech birth. Nevertheless, the overall title is significant. There are total fictions here, including an imaginative reconstruction of the life of a travelling photographer, circa 1880, which incorporates haunting details.

The two books are not separate entities. Poe's imagery and persona are found in *Dream Flights* as well. Together these collections confirm that Dave Smith is a huge talent, one of the best poets of his generation.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

The Philadelphia Story

"MY LOVE AND MY LIFE IS TO YOU, and with you; and no water can quench it, nor distance wear it out, or bring to an end. I have been with you, cared over you and served you with unfeigned love; and you are beloved of me, and near me, beyond utterance." William Penn wrote these words, not on taking leave of his wife or children but to his new City of Philadelphia, his beloved creation, planned and laid out with such concern for people and landscape, between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers.

Daniel Hoffman has written his own love poem to the city and its founder, entitling it *Brotherly Love* (*Philia-adelphos*), to discover for himself the ideal at the roots of this land.[1] He has gathered his sources from the early documents and transposed them into sixty-one poems—some original and others straight quotations—to acknowledge (I suppose) the sixty-one parts of Penn's Great Law or Body of Laws of 1682, the most humane legal code of the Colonies.

Penn deserves to be the hero of an American epic. A peace-loving Quaker, he could say to the Indians and live up to every word: "The Great Spirit who made me and you, who rules the heavens and the earth and knows the inmost thoughts of man, knows that I and my friends have a hearty desire to live in peace and friendship with you. . . . We are met on the broad pathway of good faith and good will . . . all is to be openness, brotherhood and love. . . . I will consider you as the same flesh and blood with the Christians and the same as if the one body were to be divided into two parts." Whether Penn actually spoke these words at his famous treaty with the Indians or not, we cannot be sure—for one thing, we do not know where or when the original treaty was signed. The words, at any rate, reveal a man of epic greatness.

The treaty and the myth that evolved provide the starting-point for Hoffman's three-part poem. Benjamin West's celebrated painting, done almost a hundred years later, becomes an integral core of the poet's effort to reproduce the event in image and word so that the modern reader can experience it anew. So rich are the sources, so eloquent and prolific an author was Penn (neither of the previous quotations appears in the poem), that Hoffman's principle of selection reveals the pattern of his book, for this is not a patchwork but a personal inward search into our tradition which the poet takes up, letting the material assume its own shape, elicit its own response. It is an effort to establish Being through a poetry that, as Martin Heidegger writes, locates itself in past time and place in order to make the past present for the sake of the future. The poem becomes a

[1] BROTHERLY LOVE, by *Daniel Hoffman*. Random House. $10.00; $5.95.

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home in which to dwell, an arch or rainbow arc, transferring what is out there into the here and now of our seeing and hearing. Consciously, line by line, the poet develops his plan like the grids of that Edenic city Penn proposed for his followers: "why their Penn was mightier than the sword, these words of mine and his explore."

In an indenture dated July 15, 1682, Penn and a dozen Lenni Lenape (Delaware) Indians signed an agreement granting tracts of land in Pennsylvania to Penn and his descendants in exchange for goods and guilders. Voltaire remarked: "This is the only treaty between these people and the Christians which has neither been sworn, nor broken." Penn had already obtained the grant from Charles II who was glad to pay off his debt to Penn's father with land rather than cash. By negotiating with the Indians, the young proprietor—the largest landowner of his day—confirmed his own claim and won the lasting respect of the inhabitants. This was a treaty between men, in Voltaire's words, "dwelling without envy together."

Hoffman notes that "recorded history cannot show / / A treaty ever made at Shackamaxon in the elm tree's shade—" (*pace* Benjamin West), but he himself may mislead the reader by referring to the text of the indenture as if it were the Shackamaxon treaty—the date, in addition, cannot be correct since Penn did not arrive in America until October 27, 1682, in a ship named, appropriately enough, the *Welcome.* No matter. Beginning in present-day Philadelphia with the statue of Penn over City Hall "still beckoning the Welsh and Mennonites / to his green outlying farms," Hoffman goes on to evoke the "spirit of this place" whose presence can be felt in wildflower ("Indian Pipe") and bird ("Blackburnian warbler"), recalling the two parties of the original pact whose names still identify our heritage.

The poem develops as a Divine Comedy in reverse: the vision of paradise, the hero's purgatory, and the hell of greed and betrayal. The whole is foreshadowed in the first section which probes the character and culture of the Indians. Hoffman paraphrases their creation story, preserved in the pictographs of the *Walam Olum,* and he employs both image and word to allow the story to unfold: "Earth, then, was the lodge all sat in, / Many people lived at peace, / Were friends." The fall from innocence came through "the power of the snake": black deeds, storms, darkness, and death ravaged the people. The story ends with the coming of the peaceful and friendly white man, "bringing / Great possessions, a strange tongue." In the last poems of the book, the strangers have turned "into Snakes or foes" and brought stormy destruction to the Delaware. The survivors leave the *Walam Olum* to a kindly doctor, for "the white man will have to keep in mind all that has happened."

Some of the most telling descriptions of the Lenape, their appearance, customs, government, religion, and language, appear in Penn's own observations quoted in the first part of the poem. He thought they were descended from one of the Ten Tribes of Israel: "they believe in God / and Immortality, / without the help of Metaphysicks." His sympathetic ac-

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count speaks for itself and contrasts with the harsh treatment and bigotry practiced by later generations.

In the second section, Hoffman goes back in time to explore the personality and history of the hero. Admiral William Penn, his father, helped defeat the Dutch at sea and his victory is retold in heroic couplets, reminiscent in form but not in tone of Sir John Denham's satire on the occasion. Some of the most moving lyrics in the book follow in the poet's re-creation of Penn's conversion and his struggle in behalf of other Quakers. To parallel his use of West's painting, the poet reproduces and comments on (in the manner of a seventeenth-century "Instruction to the Painter") an anonymous portrait of Penn at age twenty-two. In spite of the bland pose and armor, the eyes possess an otherworldly innocence, as though open to more than what others see. The poems praise this inwardness, report the ordeal of imprisonment and loneliness, the self-doubts that yielded to an acceptance of man's essential goodness, and probe the profound silence of prayer. The imagery here moves from darkness to light streaming downward and then springing upward in the seed growing back to God. This seed is the pearl of great price for the purchase of which a man sells all he has. Penn foresees that he will bring the persecuted faithful together in a city: "City of lovely purposes / upholding balconies" and "reeling with cerulean light—" The vision is spendidly Apocalyptic.

Like the first part, the second begins in Philadelphia today: How could Penn "Dream into being this wrangling 'City / Of Brotherly Love' "? In a statement central to his purpose, Hoffman formulates an answer:

> It is this particular design
> That grows from these
>
> Intractable pieces of deed
> And real imaginings,
>
> Only in part resembling
> Other imaginings or deeds.

In "leaves" of paper and the mulch of the ground, the poet seeks the "real," both as existence and property. First Penn, then an Indian ghost asks the question: "This life we are living, / Is it real?" Throughout, the poet also puns on "deed" as both human act and legal document. His work is a product of both research and fiction, of fact and imagination. For the myth-maker, Being and Logos are the same. The words of the poet-scholar reveal the one design, in image and in sound. "Sign" means to write but also indicates a painting; "tract" refers to a written treatise as well as an expanse of land, while "intractable" describes something ungovernable. Into this texture the poet weaves the strands of inspired and objective expression, of historical event and ownership, to unfold a master plan. The past may be "a cast-iron coach of obsolete design," but the rigid track indicates a direction. The language of the poem "takes the

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shape / Of its necessities, // Not to be known by others' / Form or name."

In the pivotal poem that opens the third section, Hoffman gives the titles of parts two and three: "An Opening of Joy" and "The Structure of Reality" in the first and last lines, and directs the reader through "the dark wood" by pointing out "the blaze / of history's trail." He declares:

> Listen—
>
> in the clamor of their voices,
> in the muddle of their deeds,
> see, there's a design
>
> where words like fallen leaves,
> like falls of snow have muffled,
> have baffled and half-hidden
>
> the structure of reality:

There is "no sinister Design" here, but a sign by which to read the times. Although "our Signers seem to give no sign" and we have trouble reading the Indian signs, when the two sides meet for the treaty and they "Gather and palaver on the river's edge, learning each others' words and gestures, // Acknowledging the signs," at that place and time love is made visible. Rendered popular through West's painting, the scene was copied in various forms, even as a sign for a tavern called "Penn's Treaty with the Indians." Like Solomon Eccles who "made of himself at Bartholomew Fair / a sign" by walking naked to protest the beating of Quakers, the poet becomes the mirror and microcosm in which our destiny is reflected. He is, in Whitman's word, the translator through whom this material passes on to the rest.

The sign that sums up the verbal vision of this epic is the third and final picture presented near the conclusion: "A Peaceable Kingdom" by the sign-painter artist, Edward Hicks. Of some sixty versions Hoffman chooses one that shows the Christ Child in the foreground, surrounded by wild and tame beasts, and, in the distance, Penn meeting with the Delaware. Framing the picture are the verses of Isaiah proclaiming the age when wolf and lamb will dwell in peace under the leadership and love of a little child, linked with the lines: "When the great PENN his famous treaty made / With indian chiefs beneath the elm tree's shade."

In his "Instructions" to the Quaker painter, Hoffman rises to the occasion in a climax of matchless candor and cadence:

> These images, in dreams enmeshed,
> Shall by thy hand and brush be fleshed
> Till art of thine
> Conceives and hangs in Heaven this sign
> Of the Inn where men's souls are refreshed:

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The colon introduces the painting which, like the previous two reproductions, itself becomes a numbered poem, a speaking picture as Philip Sidney defined poetry, illustrated as an emblem, the equivalent of an Indian pictograph. Hoffman has prepared us for this epiphany by the epigraph he cites from Emerson's "History": "Who cares what the fact was, / when we have made a constellation of it / to hang in heaven an immortal sign?"

The poet ends his book by reflecting on the Great Schism which divided the Friends under the reforming spirit of Hicks's cousin, Elias. In his craft of copying nature to express the ideal, the artist Edward sought inspiration and reconciliation until, in this version of his painting, for once "every figure / found the place in the design you didn't know / was that which best fulfilled its purpose." The design reveals itself in the Child's gesture holding the Branch of Jesse repeated by Penn's hand extended to the sachems. Although white men turned against Indians and against one another and Indians did the same, the Founder's gesture remains, in the icon of art, to remind us that, just as Penn "from his own being" drew down the light into the seedbed of his own body and our country, so the Light of God "shines now / as ever it shone // in this commonwealth / of our birth." The hand of brotherly love now reaches out to clasp our own.

In the last poem, Hoffman returns to his beginning in contemporary Philadelphia, recalls Penn's beckoning summons, and watches the city as it "seethes with being." The "spirit in the place" endures and the poem closes on a note of hope:

> —Here possibilities of grace
>
> like fragrance from rich compost cling
> to leaves where our each deed
> and misdeed fall. The Seed
> stirs, even now is quickening.

A reviewer can only hint at the wealth of thought and imagery in this work. It is filled with marvelous poetic instances: the fly that buzzes into Penn's prison cell; the husbands and wives awakening to dawn in their dream city; the quarrel between a dead sachem and settler over broken faith and the letter of the law. The religious insights, the fusion of factual details with imaginative freedom, the echoes of literary traditions from Homer to Robert Lowell, and the relationship of this poem to Hoffman's previous poetry—these should elicit a healthy critical and scholarly response. Better still, let the general reader discover in these lines the warmth of heart and the bright intellect that shines through in moments of humor, pathos and anger, and in heights of ecstasy.

A nation of many emigrants and few natives, it is time we sat down like good friends, side by side in the equality of silence, and listened as Wil-

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liam Penn listened long ago at the Quaker meeting that changed his life and our history:

> Stillness spreads until it all but bursts with promise while
> the humming world is still,
> still, and they are famished
> for a word
> which they unspeakingly await—

The Word continues to speak in the inspired poet; Being continues to become; Love continues.

Notes on Contributors

LYSANDER KEMP has published two collections of his poetry and a number of translations from the Spanish. He is now completing a book of essays on Mexican themes.

DANA GIOIA is a businessman in New York.

GILBERTO PEREZ is currently writing a book-length collection of essays on the nature of film, which will include the piece on Buster Keaton which appears in this issue. Mr. Perez teaches at the William Paterson College in New Jersey.

LUCILLE DAY is a science education consultant and free-lance writer. Her current projects include a collection of poems and a book on how and why to encourage girls in math and science.

GRACE SCHULMAN is director of the Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y and poetry editor of *The Nation.*

BERT O. STATES is a professor of Dramatic Art at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is currently working on a book on the phenomenology of theater.

ALICIA OSTRIKER* teaches English at Rutgers. Her next book of poems, *A Woman Under the Surface,* will be published in 1982 by Princeton University Press.

RICHARD COLE* is currently finishing his first book of poems under a Bush Artists Fellowship from the Bush Foundation of Saint Paul.

After raising two daughters and pursuing a career as a landscape painter, J. B. GOODENOUGH* took up writing again in 1979. Since then her poems have been widely published.

KATHRYN STRIPLING's poetry has appeared in many magazines and journals; a chapbook, *Search Party,* was published two years ago.

DAVID BROMWICH teaches English at Princeton.

LINDA BIERDS's* chapbook, *Snaring the Flightless Birds: The Legends of Maui,* is forthcoming from Allegheny Mountain Press.

ALISON TURNER* is an editor of *Quarry West* and a first-year law student at UCLA.

EMILY GROSHOLZ has just spent six months in Paris, under a grant from the Institute for the Arts and Humanistic Studies at Penn State, to work on the editing of a book of essays dealing with the philosophical and scientific work of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz.

ROBERT PHILLIPS' third poetry collection, *Running on Empty,* has just been published by Doubleday. He is currently editing the letters of Delmore Schwartz.

DAVID KUBAL's *The Consoling Intelligence: Responses to Literary Modernism* will be published in the spring by Louisiana State University Press. Currently Mr. Kubal is a visiting professor at the University of Ottawa.

J. E. CHAMBERLIN teaches English at the University of Toronto.

GEORGE CORE*, editor of *The Sewanee Review,* regularly writes essays and reviews for the periodical press.

Asterisk indicates a new contributor.

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MARVIN MUDRICK

A No-Good Self-Righteous Bragging Boasting Chickenshit Character

DESPITE APPEARANCES HEMINGWAY WAS A LITERARY MAN, he loved to write, he loved to read; but he also, because appearances don't necessarily lie, loved to hunt, fish, box, fight bulls, fight wars. In a novel by—of all writers to mention in the same breath with Hemingway—Jane Austen (*Persuasion*), a naval captain says about a fellow-captain that "His reading has done him no harm, for he has fought as well as read." Hemingway couldn't have said it better himself, but he was writing a century later for readers who were coming to consider barbarous and outmoded, if not indeed faked, such confidence as Captain Harville's in the manly correctives to mere bookishness. For example Gertrude Stein, whom Hemingway "was very fond of and god knows I was loyal too" (he tirelessly promoted her writing with editors and publishers and managed to get many pages of it into print), at last let him in on the secret that his rough stuff was so much posturing because of course like every other talented person, e.g. her, he was homosexual ("I said You knew me for four or five years and you believe that?") and therefore too sensitive to be in earnest about the rough stuff; and another "legendary woman" of his Paris years, Margaret Anderson (co-editor of the *Little Review*), wrote an autobiography which having exploded the mythical Hemingway exposed for all to see the unimportance of being Ernest:

> I never met a nicer or more flutter brained legendary woman, nor a prettier one in my life than Margaret Anderson and how did it all turn out. Poor old papa was a white rabbit with pink eyes who wandered around his pink rabbit eyes dull with pain saying have you seen so and so where's so and so? While some mysterious woman that I'm sure I hadn't asked refused to give up the best years of her life to me. Who the hell was that? And all my interest in the old bull ring was simulated (merely kicking up his rabbit hind legs). By jeesus I simulated a pretty good book out of it then.
>
> If you didn't love to box and that was all simulation how long would you keep on after you had been dumped on the floor a few times? It's 18 years [he's writing this letter at thirty-three] since I was first knocked down. Last year spent 105 days in the gulf stream. Feigning an interest in the gulfstream now to mask his other pursuits.[1]

Neither of these legendary women could allow the possibility of tastes so

[1]ERNEST HEMINGWAY: Selected Letters 1917–1961, ed. *Carlos Baker*. Scribner's. $27.50.

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different from theirs; but "I hope you do not think I am so illiberal as to want every man to have the same objects and pleasures as myself," says Jane Austen's brave and honorable Captain Harville, who probably would have allowed even the ladies, God bless 'em! their tastes so different from his own.

As for masculine-type he-men masking their other pursuits, the tastes or simulations thereof run to sweat and strain and numbers. The year after his 105-day season in the sun, summarizing this time "99 days in the sun on the gulf stream," Hemingway makes the usual numerical efforts to feign an interest in game fishing and strenuous physical activity: "54 swordfish. Seven in one day. A 468 pounder in 65 minutes, alone, no help except them holding me around the waist and pouring buckets of water on my head. Two hours and 20 minutes of straight hell with another. A 343 pounder that jumped 44 times, hooked in the bill. I killed him in an hour and forty five minutes. Poor fragile old Hem posing as a fisherman again. Weight 187 pounds. Down from 211." Still, he very likely didn't honestly enjoy it, he was just showing off for the freelance photographers as the celebrity he had already become (at thirty-four, the most famous American writer since Twain; he was being paid a dollar a word for his stories at a time when people worked for a dollar a day; how could the literary crowd not be suspicious of the only American writer whose name was as familiar to the public as a movie star's?); or if he enjoyed it he must still have been mostly swaggering and bluffing because very likely he knew a lot less about it than he pretended to. When one of "my so-called friends in N.Y." reviews *Death in the Afternoon* explaining (under the title "Bull in the Afternoon") what a bull-thrower the author is, the author fails to be grateful: "Every word I wrote about the Spanish fighting bull was absolutely true and result of long and careful and exhaustive observation. Then they pay Eastman, who knows nothing about it, to say I write sentimental nonsense. . . . I have seen 50 bulls do what that fool says from his ignorance—no bull can do. . . . And it's a commonplace that I lack confidence that I am a man—what shit." He's addressing the complaint to his editor, Max Perkins, who shares these "friends" and would no doubt think up excuses for them, so Hemingway closes the case bang-bang-bang plus one for the road: "You see what they can't get over is (1) that I *am* a man (2) that I can beat the shit out of any of them (3) that I can write. The last hurts them the worst."

Or maybe, kicking up his rabbit hind legs, he merely simulates closing the case, because despite appearances he's a thoughtful and inquisitive man, he doesn't mind backing off to give his correspondent some breathing room; his letters are open, alert, quick-tempered, good-humored, courtly, expansive, as if he's more interested in the person he's writing to than in the case he's making, and more interested in the case than in closing it. (Mary Hemingway to an interviewer a few years ago: "He wrote terrific letters. They went on and on and on and on." Here they are, and she's right.) For instance he takes all the time in the world to inform Charles Scribner, his publisher, who has just published a best-selling first novel by a new novelist, that *From Here to Eternity* "is not great no matter

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what they tell you." (Down in Key West or Cuba he kept ordering books by the dozen, he read them every night and, because of his insomnia, often all night through, and he always had something to say about them.) "It is much too long and much too bitching and his one fight, against the planes, at Pearl Harbour day is almost musical comedy. . . . Things will catch up with him and he will probably commit suicide. [N.B. Don't tempt fate by wishing it on somebody else.] Who could announce in his publicity in the year 1951 that 'he went over the hill' in 1944. That was a year in which many people were very busy doing their duty and in which many people died." (One of the people busy doing their duty that magic year of his third war was Hemingway, who between the dispatches he wrote and sent off to *Collier's* spent much of 1944 as a combat irregular and occasional guerrilla commander in France. In an earlier letter to Scribner: "I truly can't fly anymore. It gives my head too much hell. I should not have kept on with it in 44. But there are a lot of things I should not have done in 44 and thank God I did them all.") Jones, though, wasn't a man for duty and when duty called he turned a deaf ear: "To me he is an enormously skillful fuck-up. . . . Probably I should re-read it again to give you a truer answer. But I do not have to eat an entire bowl of scabs to know they are scabs; nor suck a boil to know it is a boil; nor swim through a river of snot to know it is snot. . . . Make all the money you can out of him as quickly as you can and hold out enough for Christian Burial." (Duty and bravery weren't for Hemingway fads or fancies. Fighting in the Spanish Civil War he wrote to Dos Passos, who had suddenly discovered that the Loyalists were Communist dupes: "You know all people are not cowards, many people will fight and not give a damn about dying to save their country from a foreign invasion and war was not invented by either the communists or the fascists . . . ")

Scribner was miffed, so Hemingway's next letter begins, "Thanks for your good letter. I am sorry when I write crabby letters." Then, after four ebullient paragraphs of personal good feeling and inside info ("I was so ashamed to be ill when you and Vera were down"; "there is no substitute for actual fishing as it uses muscles you don't use for anything else"), once more unto the breach: "The reason the Col. Jones thing got on my nerves was that when I read the book I spotted him for a psycho and not a real soldier. . . . This is not to brag but Col. Jones and I are a different breed of cats. I can remember haveing a major concussion and a smashed head that took two hours and a half of surgery to clean up and fifty seven stitches in it. Also had both my knees so badly swollen that I could not bend either one. Six days later they lowered me from the attack transport in the LCVP because nobody, and especially me, thought I could go down the net. That was at 0200 June 6th 1944." That was D-Day in Normandy and, many thought at the time, thank God it came. He was there, he did it, and unlike the voiceless many ("Trouble with army was that the tests, classifications, screenings according to ability were so thorough that practically no one who was literate or articulate ever saw combat") he can recollect it in all its archaic flair for his unbelieving friends in New York: "please try to see why I had a prejudiced attitude toward the

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damned bitching and suffering and glorification of incorrigibles instead of good soldiers." The good soldier is a good man; the bad soldier is bad because he won't do the job, dereliction of duty is a crime of omission, and one set of incorrigibles is quite like another: "I remember that they released a group of crimes of violence convicts from Joliet Penitentiary who volunteered for the war. Not one of them was worth a shit in combat and they all (the ones the 4th drew) ended up in the motor pool or the rear echelon":

> I can remember sitting against an apple tree in an orchard while they were setting up the cp for the night. I'd been to see the General and told him what I'd seen and, as far as I knew, how things looked (to me anyway) and I was sitting against this apple tree and trying not to think about the next day and all the rest of them and wondering how long my headache would last. It used to come in flashes like battery fire. But there was a main permanent one all the time. I nicknamed it the MLR 2 (main line of resistance) and just accepted that I had it.
>
> Well this convict from the motor pool comes up and said he'd heard there was somebody from Chicago and he was from Chicago and wanted to talk to them. He'd gotten hold of some Calvados somewhere. They used to carry it in jerry cans on their trucks.
>
> So I said I was from Oak Park.
>
> "Lace curtain stuff, eh?" said the convict.
>
> "That's correct. And now you fuck off back to where you came from before I cut your balls off."
>
> "What do you mean you'd cut my balls off?"
>
> "Like I said. And put them in your mouth. You got a nice chin for a pair of balls. What did you do time for? Molesting little girls?"
>
> "I did time for robbery."
>
> "All right, thief. Fuck off while you still got a pair of balls if you got any. Fuck off, Jack."

On and on ("when you are used to writing it is hard to stop and I like to talk with you even when it is only in letters") and blithely concludes: "Best always, Charlie. Take good care of yourself and we will make a good fishing trip and not try for the giant beasts but for all the delight fishes."

After Scribner's rejoinder, Hemingway picks up with as much affection as ever: "I'm sorry that my letter made you so angry. . . . Malice is a rough word to use in a letter. . . . But I have no malice against the boy Jones . . . nor the Cardinal [in his previous letter Scribner had noted he was publishing a novel by Cardinal Spellman, and in reply Hemingway had said a few words about that oiliest of the ecclesiastical guardians of public morals at mid-century—"I look forward to the Cardinal's book which we will burn without reading. Did it ever occur to that Prince of the Church that he is takeing the bread out of the mouths of young writers? He might have thought of it when he led Seminarists as strike-breakers against his under-paid Catholic grave diggers"]." Scribner is an-

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gry enough to invoke the recently deceased Max Perkins against Hemingway, who takes the challenge: "I loved Max very much too and knew him pretty well and he always trusted me even when I was unjust and mean":

> Please bury Max's ghost for keeps and cut out this about he, Tom Wolfe and Scott [Fitzgerald] being gods and you etc. It makes me ashamed. Max was Max with five daughters and an idiot wife. Tom Wolfe was a one book boy and a glandular giant with the brains and the guts of three mice. Scott was a rummy and a liar and dishonest about money with the in-bred talent of a dishonest and easily frightened angel.
>
> Why not forget all that shit and be a fine publisher and a brave man as you are and should be?

So much for the effulgence of the last great publishing house as recalled in tranquillity by its sole surviving luminary; but "Please don't be offended at any of this and remember I am writing from fondness"; and then a two-page postscript about what and why he eats (because Scribner is worried about his health with good reason: Hemingway had chronic very high blood pressure and a list of debilitating injuries as long as an arm and a leg) with a funny story about constipation and (because he isn't doing much eating these days) a list of the meats and vegetables he loves, and a final reassurance: "So don't worry about me down here eating nothing and makeing an ass of myself. I have had strange eating habits since I was a boy. It is nothing to be proud of, ashamed of nor alarmed about. Bears don't eat all winter and Harry Wills [a great boxer of the 'twenties] fasts a month each year."

In the 'fifties he had to put up with the psychoanalytical critics, who took their cue from the chapter on him in Edmund Wilson's *The Wound and the Bow*. He was always polite and patient with them, even solicitous, sometimes very kind, beginning with Wilson himself, who wanted to reprint several of Hemingway's letters to him and so gave Hemingway, in his reply granting permission, an opportunity to comment on "the wound": "I can not understand the part about what my Wound was. I tried to. But it wasn't any of the wounds I knew." Later, when Wilson sent him an inscribed copy of *The Shores of Light*, he apologized for not having sent him *The Old Man and the Sea* which "I wanted to send you . . . very much but because we had exchanged a few civilized and friendly letters I thought you might think I was sending it hoping for a favorable notice." (He never quite understood what it was to be the most famous writer in the world, and the most famous since Tolstoy.) He liked Wilson's book, had read it "until three o'clock in the morning," which reminded him of their ill-starred dead friend who had so depended on both of them: "That was the mystic hour that haunted Scott. It always seemed to me the best hour of the night once you had accepted insomnia and no longer worried about your sins." Then, because he had read in the *Times*

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something about Wilson's wanting to learn Spanish, he could advise him on that from his own experience (he knew a lot, liked to show it, could hardly help being eager and helpful—Blake's "fountain, not a cistern"—with what he knew, knew also that he wasn't the world's best speller and was apologetic but unabashed):

> The language is easy to learn superficially. But there are so many meanings to each word that, spoken, it is almost double talk. In addition to the known meanings of a word there are many secret meanings from the talk of thieves, pick-pockets, pimps and whores, etc. This occurs in all languages and most of the secret language is very ancient. If you want to start on it I would think that the best book to head in with is Gerald Brenan's The Literature of The Spanish People published by the Cambridge press. It is a sound book. His book The Spanish Labrynth (probably mis-spelled) is the best book I know on Spain politically. If you really want to learn the language you can skip a lot and start in with Quevedo. It is tough to cut your teeth on. But the fashionable thing of learning Lorca is completely stupid. His poetry is based on Andalusian music. If you do not not know the disonnances of that music, or if you do not know Arabic, it is almost meaningless. (If I misspell please do not think I am basically illiterate as Scott was. I know each time I mis-spell a word. But how would you finish a hand typed letter if you worked with a dictionary? I use a dictionary or dictionery to check on spelling when I write for keeps. . . .)

He knew he was a lousy letter-writer because here he wasn't writing for keeps: "Never could write a good letter," he lamented over and over again, but kept dashing them off anyhow for lack of anything better to do at the moment, great careless heaps of generosity—"quantity if not quality," he remarked ruefully—that meander hither and yon in every fascinating direction, six thousand surviving letters of which one tenth are printed in this nine-hundred-page volume. He also talked around to everybody and too much and too freely:

> Lillian Ross wrote a profile of me which I read, in proof, with some horror. But since she was a friend of mine and I knew that she was not writing in malice she had a right to make me seem that way if she wished. I did not believe that I talked like a half-breed choctaw nor that it gave a very sound impression of some one who gets up at first light and works hard at writing most of the days of his life. But I had just finished a book and when you have done that you do not really give a damn for a few weeks. So I did not mind it although I knew it was harmful to me just as the Life piece [by Malcolm Cowley] was. There was no harm intended and much received. But I am still fond of Lillian.

He offers this paragraph and others like it in a long, courteous letter to a

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complete stranger named Bledsoe, a publisher's editor who is trying to persuade him to grant permission for quotes in the book about Hemingway that Philip Young is writing.

If Wilson could poke around for a definitive wound, so could the new academic critics descending on the at last ripe enough twentieth-century American classics. (Arthur Mizener had already done his worst on Fitzgerald, after Hemingway had lavishly answered Mizener's questions and done his best to help; when the book came out he wrote Mizener: "Thank you very much for the book and for the dedication. It is a splendid piece of re-search. There are many errors that I would be willing to submit you corrections on for any future editions," and proceeded at once with pages of corrections.) Bledsoe having been turned down—Hemingway suggested that Young ask for himself—Young made the request and Hemingway granted it "if you give me your word that the book is not biography disguised as criticism and that it is not a psycho-analytical study of a living writer"; but as Hemingway had stipulated sent at the same time a transcript of a Hemingway symposium he had participated in, which the subject of it found "very interesting, but fairly shocking in the way the three critics and their critic lightly used serious medical terms without, as far as I knew, being medically qualified to pronounce such judgements even in private. This is not a personal crack nor an attempt to be rude nor smart. I was interested in the paper and in your conclusions but shocked at the ir-responsibility of some of the statements made in public." These measured objections sounded so much like a veto that Young threw himself on Hemingway's mercy, which turned out to be the right thing to throw himself on:

> you say that whether you and your wife eat depends on it. I would maintain my stand with Mr. Bledsoe forever. But I feel damned badly at your work, however mistaken I believe it to be, being held up and you yourself being thwarted and your liveing imperilled.
>
> I had written you a six page letter stateing why I did not believe you should publish the book. But since I have given you the rights to use the quotations it could only worry you. I am writing Scribner's to pay to you my share of whatever Mr. Bledsoe pays Scribner's for the rights to quote and I would be happy if you would quote more extensively than you have if economy in quotation has been to hold down costs.
>
> In this way perhaps I can make up to you whatever my six weeks delay in answering your letter has cost you.
>
> I am very sorry, kid, if you are up the creek financially. I can let you have $200. if you need it and you can feel free to call me a son of a bitch if you wish. If you are broke you cannot be sued and collected from. That would be the publishers.

Charles Fenton, collecting material for *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway*, began by drawing a sympathetic note from Hemingway about somebody who had already published and botched some of the early ma-

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terial: "I am sorry they poached on your preserve, but think of poor old Cowley who has staked out my whole life of which he knows practically fuck-all nothing. Tell me if you have any really wizard ideas about how it will come out in the end. . . . Excuse the dull note." Later, as Fenton sent sections along, Hemingway wrote incredibly patient and scrupulous and lengthy, detailed corrections and reminiscences and commentaries: "Your article contains many inaccuracies"; "everything is so changed now in America where a prairie is now a sub-division, a bare-assed hill now can be the grassy slope to a monument, buildings are torn down and others put up, green lawns and big trees are gone and apartment houses are in their place, where the speaks were we have Rockerfeller Center, a good man is dead and a garrulous fool speaks for him, and no amount of Mizener makes it come alive. . . . You need to have fished the stream before they put in the dam for the irrigation project"; "I average between fifty cents and a dollar a word for everything that I write and I write you letters between five hundred and fifteen hundred words long which you incorporate in material which you sell for 2½ cents a word with a royalty deal over 100,000 copies sold. Mr. Fenton I hope you will agree that this is economically unsound"; "Thanks very much for refreshing my memory about Kansas City." But Fenton was not a man to be thanked with impunity. Two months later, he sent a manuscript the "first page or pages" of which had "so many errors of fact that I could spend the rest of the winter re-writing" to set it straight, whereupon Hemingway spends two limpid nostalgic pages ("The first thing the Connables did was to go down to Palm Beach and leave me in charge of the house and of Ralph Jr. I had never run a house nor a house of that size nor with that many servants etc. before and it was fun") correcting a single curt inaccurate Fenton sentence about his relations with the Connable family. Also Fenton was preparing on his own to publish some of Hemingway's early journalism: "You have located unsigned pieces by me through pay vouchers. But you do not know which pieces were changed or re-written and which were not. . . . Writing that I do not wish to publish, you have no right to publish. I would no more do a thing like that to you than I would cheat a man at cards or rifle his desk or wastebasket or read his personal letters." Hemingway tried to reason with him over the telephone, but "he goes into almost psycho rages. . . . Both times I called him he blew his top" (Hemingway is writing his lawyer trying to head off the apprenticeship book: "Just the sight of a legal letter-head spooks most people"; but it didn't spook Fenton).

The Fenton mess had one pleasant consequence. Dorothy Connable, a friend of Hemingway's youth whom he hadn't been in touch with for decades, wrote because she had heard from Fenton, and in Hemingway's cautionary reply—"the only way to stop these buzzards is to tell them *absolutely nothing*"—his old feelings start to well up ("Please skate once for me. And how is your tennis?"), especially in a lyrical postscript: "This letter is stupid. But I was very moved to hear from you. More than I thought I ever could be about almost anything. Good, fine, lovely, beautiful Dorothy."

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His loveliest, discreetest, and most heartbreaking letters are the late ones to his first wife, Hadley, many years after their marriage:

> the good luck is to have had all the wonderful things and times we had. Imagine if we had been born at a time when we could never have had Paris when we were young. Do you remember the races out at Enghien and the first time we went to Pamplona by ourselves and that wonderful boat the Leopoldina and Cortina D'Ampezzo and the Black Forest? Last night I couldn't sleep and so I just remembered all the things we'd ever done and all the songs,
>
> *"A feather kitty's talent lies*
> *In scratching out the other's eyes.*
> *A feather kitty never dies*
> *Oh immortality."*
>
> We have three good cats here so I sang them the song and they were very pleased. We have a genuine Wax Puppy [a pet name, together with "feather kitty," from their marriage] too with a tail curled exactly the same way and the cats all like him. . . .
>
> Good bye Miss Katherine Kat. I love you very much. It is all right to do so because it hasn't anything to do with you and that great Paul; it is just untransferable feeling for early and best Gods. But will never mention it if bad. Thought you might just be interested to know.
>
> Your friend Taty
> Ernest Hemingway

Some time later their son wrote him that Hadley was ill and in the hospital: "Poor Cat I hate to think of you as ever ill with anything. Hope *so* you are all right now. This letter brings much, much love and get well quickness"—

> It is wonderful when Marty and/or the kids are here but it is lonesome as a bastard when I'm here alone . . . so lonesome . . . that when come in to have a few drinks with my cats and the next thing am asleep on the floor with the Capeheart still playing and all correspondence just stacked in two big wooden boxes. . . .
>
> I never had so damned much time to think in my life, especially nights on the water and here when I can't sleep from haveing lost the habit, and have thought about you with great pleasure and how wonderful you were and are. . . .
>
> So long my dearest Katherine Cat. Paul can't mind me still loveing you because knowing you he would know I would be crazy if I didn't and I have been crazy but never stay that way for very long.
>
> When it is really rough on ocean sing old songs like Oh My Gentlemen, If you've Got Any Feather-Cats, and a Feather-Kitty's Talent Lies, the Basque crew [of his fishing boat] think these are folk songs of my Pais [country].

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So they are. So, My Pais, get well quickly and take care of yourself and of Paul and accept the obedient devotion of your

Taty

(In his farewell letter to her nineteen years earlier, he concluded: "I think perhaps the luckiest thing Bumby will ever have is to have you for a mother. And I won't tell you how I admire your straight thinking, your head, your heart and your very lovely hands and I pray God always that he will make up to you the very great hurt I have done you—who are the best and truest and loveliest person that I have ever known." Before they were married she wrote him assuring him that she wouldn't permit her strict conventional upbringing to impose itself on him: "It would be frightful for a person like you, that is so wonderful, so everchanging—whose big value is a great resounding reaction to every sort of thing—to be afraid some one he loved very much was going, consciously or not, to level him down to smooth even feeling and tho't. I would break up anything rather than do that.")

There are sometimes mitigating circumstances though, as he explains in a letter to Harvey Breit: "This one Harvey you must never tell anybody. Maybe I wrote it to you before. Miss Mary [the fourth and final wife] at the time of June 6 1944 had in love with her a Gen who was heading up Psycho-pathological warfare . . . [and] had given up the command of a Division to Fight in France for love of Miss Mary he told her. I told her that any son of a bitch who would give up the chance of commanding a Division for any god-damn woman on earth expressly including Miss Mary should be shot." And years after his marriage to the imperious Martha Gellhorn he confessed what a pleasure it was to have a maid named Martha whom he could order around.

He's not only a very funny man bursting with all those stories to tell (or, as some might say, a great comic writer), but the comedy is nearly always genial. Writing to a Southern Agrarian: "By the way, how did the civil war ever come out? Am inspired to ask this by a friend of mine, Winston Guest, having recently been reading Renan's Life of Jesus, due to his thinking he ought to have some spiritual influence in his life in these grave times [during World War II], and I had to warn him not to skip to the end to see how it came out. As a matter of fact it turned out, finally, that they nailed Jesus in the 34th." Writing to ninety-year-old Bernard Berenson to amuse him: "I remember in the cathedral [of Santiago de Compostela] one morning a peasant woman coming up to me, I think she believed I worked there, and asking me, 'Where do you go to eat the body of Jesus?' . . . and I answered her, 'Right this way, Lady.' Life has been a lot of fun and I have no complaints." Writing to a soldier friend who has decided not to visit him in Cuba (he had scores of friends and loved to see them simultaneously or one at a time wherever he happened to be, but especially to go hunting or fishing with them): "What a bastard you are to decide not to come down here. I respect your decision moderately but still hope for a re-reading. See-ing you again was all I gave a damn about.

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But am getting to be like the whore who wouldn't give a fuck for nothing. And this is evidently nothing again. Our well beloved nothing and from who's or whom's well?" Quoting for Harvey Breit some pregnant passages from his Gidean Journal:

> Probably I better knock off now and write some more on my Journal.
> Do you think maybe with the publication of my Journal I will be able to become an *Homme des Lettres*?
> It has always been my ambition.
>
> Yours in belle *lettres*
> Ernest
>
> Encl. *A Journal*
> Fragments from Ernst von Hemingstein's JOURNAL
> Friday.—Saw Valery. He looked very poorly. We both agreed Joyce's eyes were bad and that Gide is now impotent. Fargue is dead. A pity.
> Saturday.—The Scribners (father and son) are publishing my *The Sun Also Rises*. It is a treatise on basic loneliness and the inadequacy of promiscuity. Perkins the Scribners editor is enthused. Not as much for the moral content but what he naively calls the dialogue. I must study how to eliminate this as well as the over-long description of the Spanish country side. . . .
> Wednesday.—Learned Fargue is alive not dead. Splendid. Another report on Gide this time from ******. Most depressing. . . .
> Friday.—Attended the Crucifixion of our Lord. Tintoretto was there. He took copious notes and appeared to be very moved. . . .

The Journal seems hilarious to me, the proper epitaph on the French literary sensibility, but after a page of it Carlos Baker has had enough and cuts it short with a bracketed statement: "The journal continues for four more pages"—which is one of the few times Baker appears in this unreliably and snottily annotated volume and which confirms one's suspicion that his uninterrupted absence would be a blessing. The letters belatedly reveal or confirm, also, that to an astonishing degree Baker's biography consists of paraphrases of Hemingway's letters pruned, twisted, and framed to demonstrate Baker's moral and intellectual superiority to the man who wrote them: "Ernest was reminded of his father's suicide when the young expatriate Harry Crosby shot himself to death in Paris on December 11th [1929]. Harry was a hell of a good boy, said Ernest, and he was feeling awfully bad about losing him. Whatever the sincerity of his emotions about Crosby, with whom he had never been close, Ernest seems to have been in a *mea culpa* mood when he wrote a lengthy letter to Scott Fitzgerald the day after Crosby's death. . . . " Now Hemingway wasn't saintly or just a barrel of laughs; he was easily and sometimes unreasonably riled, he didn't like to be told things for his own good: "The more I'm let alone the better I function"; "when things are brought to your attention [as by Fitzgerald, who liked to bring him snide stories—

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"the god damndest stories about myself that I've ever heard"—that other people were telling about him] they make you sore as hell"; he didn't like people who didn't like his writing; he didn't like Fitzgerald's need for reassurance or Pound's politics. During the 'thirties there is a long spell of mean and gritty letters that take out on everybody else the scads of personal difficulties (one supposes) that he could neither mention nor himself cope with at the time, as a letter in 1943 to Archibald MacLeish celebrating their reconciliation seems to indicate:

> Today I had your letter of April 27th and it made me very happy. . . .
>
> You old bastard. We must both be thinking we are going to die or something to become so forgiveing. I was *awful* for a whole period of years. Too awful for anybody to stand. Lately I've been good for almost a year but I never see any of my old friends so nobody can appreciate it. That's one reason why I would like you to come down to see how good, non-righteous, non-bragging, non-boasting, almost non-chickenshit I have become. Otherwise am liable to die and nobody will ever register it.

He could on occasion even afterward be a no-good, self-righteous, bragging, boasting, chickenshit character, and he had tastes that Baker or Gertrude Stein or most of the rest of us can't be expected to share: "My eyes are almost too bad to box now. Am only good for bar and street fights now but think can last in that for a long time maybe if pick my spots." But on the evidence of the letters, especially those written during the last two decades of his life, he was a source, a beacon, a good man, and no amount of Baker can cover him up forever.

He was an original and the sole continuator of a tradition. At twenty-six he hadn't after years of trying made a nickel from any of his stories and was still unpublished in the United States, but persuading Horace Liveright to publish *In Our Time* he insisted that the book would sell because it "will be praised by highbrows and can be read by lowbrows. There is no writing in it that anybody with a high-school education cannot read." Sounds like an earlier American writer, about whom Hemingway said in *Green Hills of Africa* that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*," though what he must have meant was that *In Our Time* was the first American book since Twain and that its author would penetrate and disclose the American character as no writer had done except Twain and that his reward would be fame, publicity, money, and ultimate very low spirits as Twain's had been. D. H. Lawrence came across the book in 1927 and reviewed it:

> *In Our Time* calls itself a book of stories, but it isn't that. It is a series of successive sketches from a man's life, and makes a fragmentary novel. . . .
>
> Nick is a type one meets in the more wild and woolly regions of the

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United States. He is the remains of the lone trapper and cowboy. Nowadays he is educated, and through with everything. It is a state of *conscious*, accepted indifference to everything except freedom from work and the moment's interest. Mr. Hemingway does it extremely well. Nothing matters. Everything happens. One wants to keep oneself loose. Avoid one thing only: getting connected up. If you get held by anything, break it. Don't be held. Break it, and get away. Don't get away with the idea of getting somewhere else. Just get away, for the sake of getting away. Beat it! "Well, boy, I guess I'll beat it." Ah, the pleasure in saying that! . . .

And he beats it, to somewhere else. In the end he'll be a sort of tramp, endlessly moving on for the sake of moving away from where he is. This is a negative goal, and Mr. Hemingway is really good, because he's perfectly straight about it. He is like Krebs, in that devastating Oklahoma sketch: he doesn't love anybody, and it nauseates him to have to pretend he does. He doesn't even *want* to love anybody; he doesn't want to go anywhere, he doesn't want to do anything. He wants just to lounge around and maintain a healthy state of nothingness inside himself, and an attitude of negation to everything outside himself. And why shouldn't he, since that is exactly and sincerely what he feels? If he really *doesn't* care, then why should he care? Anyhow, he doesn't.

Lawrence exaggerates the "nothing matters" aspect of *In Our Time*—fishing matters, telling the truth matters—but not the wariness and unconnectedness, the aloofness of Nick and Krebs. While Hemingway was writing the early stories his mentor was Pound, with whom he recalls (in *A Moveable Feast*) a relevant literary exchange:

I remember asking Ezra once when we had walked home from playing tennis out on the Boulevard Arago, and he had asked me into his studio for a drink, what he really thought about Dostoyevsky.

"To tell you the truth, Hem," Ezra said, "I've never read the Rooshians."

And "Keep to the French," Pound advised him. "You've plenty to learn there." At any rate Hemingway's fiction never had any truck with the Rooshians, the literary conscience of these dispossessed trappers and cowboys is Flaubert ("I always try to do the thing by three cushion shots rather than by words or direct statement"). The spare and aloof style worked as an emblem for the inexperienced and guarded boy trying not to be overwhelmed by the unexpectedness of the world; but it didn't work for the exuberant, affectionate, gregarious, excitable, noisy, mettlesome man who therefore (except in his life and in his letters) let himself be swallowed whole as if he were Margaret Anderson's pink-eyed bunny sliding down the narrow gullet of the style making a few uneasy bulges along the way, turning ingenuousness into pomposity, guardedness into the tight-lipped tough-guy manner that instantly produced and delimited the

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apparently imperishable subliterary and cinematic genre of the private eye. Style is a drag, unlike life and letters. The occasional bragging, boasting, hectoring Hemingway of the letters can carry on waving his arms and shaking his fists in front of Harold Loeb's busted—not by Hemingway—Jewish nose ("Do you think that . . . if you and I had ever had a fight I would not have knocked the shit out of you?") without much spoiling our fun or his and, after a quarrel in Pamplona that he would represent rather differently in *The Sun Also Rises*, even be remorseful ("I was terribly tight and nasty to you last night and I dont want you to go away with that nasty insulting lousiness as the last thing of the fiestas. I wish I could wipe out all the mean-ness and I suppose I cant but this is to let you know that I'm thoroly ashamed of the way I acted and the stinking, unjust uncalled for things I said"): a bit of jealousy might have been involved (fifty years later Hadley remarked that "in the book he was most unjust to Harold Loeb. I have always liked him. And he was awfully handsome!"); but the Flaubertian pose of objectivity and judiciousness toward Cohn and other unacceptables in the malevolent opening sentences—elsewhere too—of *The Sun Also Rises* is an assumption of omniscience that the details won't support:

> Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being very shy and a thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym. . . .

As for the celebrated opening paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms*—

> In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

—the alleged hypnotic power of it relies flagrantly, as many of Hemingway's impressionistic passages do, on the constrictedness of the operation, the virtually italicized repetitions, the artificial prepositional phrases standing in for the natural possessive case, the geologically elemental vocabulary, the subordination of every other grammatical function to those

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somnolent "and"s all of which stigmata make Hemingway the easiest writer to parody recognizably (and the hardest to recognize in the straightforwardness of his letters).

There are much better passages in both novels, particularly in *A Farewell to Arms*, which is Hemingway's only intense and sustained large-scale work (two among many superb scenes: "the wound," Hemingway's not Wilson's; the escape across the lake to Switzerland) till it comes to the accidental and merely terrible misery of the ordeal at the end. But he ought to have laid off Flaubert and paid more attention to Twain and the Russians, and most of all to himself. (But he didn't have to think so because the manifest intentions of the style made the public if not his readers mistake him for the legendary man he really was.) Meanwhile his letters will console us with the unstinting, unaffected, impromptu, candid, informative, broad and delicate, comic and dead-serious presence he denied us in his fiction. They are the biggest American literary event since the publication of *In Our Time* and, together with Kafka's and Joyce's and Lawrence's, the best letters of the century. What would we think of Dr. Johnson if we had only the collected works? Hemingway's letters are his Boswell.

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DAVID KUBAL

Fiction Chronicle

"SICK. I AM OFTEN SICK OF ART," Maureen Howard confessed in her autobiography, *Facts of Life.* Certainly, we all experience at times the same nausea, even if we do not admit it so baldly. It is not only the prodigious amount of art everywhere insisting on our attention—the source of Miss Howard's discontent—that oppresses us; it is also the kind—the species, as Keats said of certain poetry, "that has a palpable design upon us." "Are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy," he asked, "engendered in the whims of an Egotist?" So jealous of his autonomy, Keats preferred his poetry "uncontaminated & unobtrusive." That there is little such art available would seem to make a good case for criticism; or at least a criticism that itself has no designs on the reader, but is content, rather, to interpret and judge disinterestedly. Besides, an effective criticism might, for all we know, reduce the nausea and increase the pleasure of art.

Despite the bleakness of his theme—or perhaps because of it—G. B. Edwards ends his extraordinary novel[1] so happily that the reader, long accustomed to conclusions of bereavement, paucity, and unforgiving despair, might find himself resisting a gift providing so much pleasure. That one can be suspicious of such generosity may indicate just how far the novel has departed from its origins as the genre of forgiveness and reconciliation. And it may even explain why Mr. Edwards could not find a publisher before his death in 1976 for this his only novel. Like John Kennedy Toole's *The Confederacy of Dunces,* which was also published posthumously after a number of rejections with an introduction by an eminent writer—in his case, Walker Percy—*The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* is presented by John Fowles, a novelist who has expressed his disenchantment with the easy pessimism of contemporary fiction.

Ebenezer Le Page's story is, nonetheless, a melancholy one, telling of the gradual and inevitable absorption of the Isle of Guernsey into the monolithic culture of the twentieth century. It dramatizes the conflict between the island mentality characterized, as described by Mr. Fowles, by "the fierce independence, the toughness of spirit, the patience and courage, the ability to cope and make do" and the voracious appetite of a civilization, which desires to include everything, to leave nothing out of its master plan, relentless in its designs on islands of all sorts. Over the course of the century, through the effects of World War I, the Nazi occupation, and the post-war invasion of tourists and land speculators, Guernsey surrenders itself to the larger world. Only a few resist, including Ebenezer, the narrator, whose happiness includes finding someone of his own kind

[1] THE BOOK OF EBENEZER LE PAGE, by *G. B. Edwards.* Knopf. $13.95.

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to leave his property to—a girl, who may be his daughter, and a maverick painter, the illegitimate son of a woman whom he has always loved but never married.

> I don't want to die, me! I want to stop alive for ever, if only to see the ships pass. . . . Forgive them, forgive them; for they have loved much! . . . I wish I could live my life again. I wish I could write my story again. I have judged people. I want to bless. I want to bless every soul who has ever lived and laughed and suffered on this whore of an island, this island in the sun, this island in God's sea.

These are among Ebenezer's last words, sentimental only when taken out of context. Within the novel, the emotion is fully earned, fought for and gained during a life of anger, deprivation, and austere loneliness. Most painful for Ebenezer is the loss of the male, the severing of that fundamental bond, beginning with the death of his father in the Boer War and continuing with the slaughter of his friends during the two World Wars. But the female and marriage are also his enemies, jealous as they are, in Ebenezer's view, of the independent male self. If these archaic ideas are at odds with contemporary notions of a mature selfhood, they remind us of the great wounds inflicted upon men by the continuous wars of our time and the costs exacted by the therapeutic society. Besides, they are significantly qualified, if not negated, by the love and erotic joy of Ebenezer's legatees. The book remains, then, an anachronism in which the reader can discover all the old rewards of the novel: the voice of an identifiable narrator; affectionate descriptions of nature; the drama of a society told through its manners and domestic rituals; and the celebration of the powers of love and will.

Caroline Gordon's short fiction[2] reminds us that story writers used to create characters and tell tales before they began to construct elaborate symbols and explore consciousness and the limits of language, delighted by their ability to puzzle. Indeed her stories are so unfashionable that one wonders if she could have found a contemporary magazine to print them. To the point is that of her twenty-three stories, twenty first appeared more than thirty years ago with the majority published in the 1930s. Yet it seems only appropriate that they should be collected now, since fiction for Miss Gordon is essentially an act of recovery and preservation. In "Tom Rivers," the tale of a drifter, a type which particularly elicits her admiration, the narrator says: "There is a curious thing I have observed. If you sit day after day, summer after summer, in a chair under the same tree, you will notice how the light falls under and through the boughs to strike always in the same pattern. You notice how it falls that way year after year, changing only with the seasons, and you think how you might go away and suffer death or torture by fire or flood, and the light always

[2] THE COLLECTED STORIES OF CAROLINE GORDON. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $17.95.

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at the same hour in that season will be creeping around the bole of that beech tree." In "Mr. Powers" she observes: "Ellen looked away and then back again, trying to fix the scene in her memory. The broad valley, the turning green river, and the long line of the old covered bridge would stay, she knew in her memory, but the bright, flickering light that was so much a part of it all would grow dimmer and more unreal until finally it would vanish entirely. You could not prison light in the memory." But Miss Gordon does catch and hold that light in her fiction, because she is first of all concerned with what in his introduction to the collection Robert Penn Warren calls, borrowing the phrase from Henry James, the "solidity of specification." Her world of the mid-South and of Kentucky in particular is specified not only in the description of landscape, and in the rendering of voice, accent, and gesture, but also in the telling of stories, tales that possess plot and resolution.

Miss Gordon's most successful and intriguing stories include the Professor Aleck Maury cycle and the long classic, "The Captive," about a pioneer woman who is kidnapped and escapes from a band of Indians. Both characters embody the virtues of resistance, holding off by force of will the inevitability of time and nature. Professor Maury's heroism also includes the resistance to family, clan, and the increasing homogeneity of modern life. A sophisticated Huck Finn, his "territory" as he grows older is reduced to the hotel, the boarding house, and the fishing hole: "There were places on this earth's surface that he would never revisit. . . . Oh, the light on the long grass, on the green, willowy pool! They did not know why you went or where, but let a man break the lockstep and go over the hill and they grew frightened and watched his return with implacable eyes; sometimes they denied him the privilege of resuming his chains. . . ." The memory of that light compensates for so much—especially at the end of the story.

Richard Stern is enamored by cities, specifically Chicago and New York, because in them he finds humankind in all its variousness. At the beginning of the first of this new collection of stories,[3] the narrator, Professor Wissler, intones the singular names of his students: "Miss Fennig. Mr. Quincy. Mr. Parcannis. Miss Shimbel. Ms. Bainbridge. . . . Miss Vibsayana. . . . Miss Glennie, Mr. Waldemeister." Later he says: "I love individuals, yes, and I stay aware of clothes, bodies, gestures, voices, minds, but it is the class itself I love. The humanscape. The growth of the unique molecule of apprehension and transmission. From the first tense, scattered day through the interplay, the engagements, the drama of collective discourse to the intimate sadness of the last class. How complicated the history, the anatomy, the poetry of such a body." At the center of Mr. Stern's love for the "humanscape," moreover, is a large sympathy for the individual caught in a world too narrow for his energies and talents. The sadness emerges then not only because the "class" ends, the body broken up and scattered; it also resides in the realization that the whole cannot

[3] PACKAGES, by *Richard Stern.* Coward, McCann & Geoghegan. $10.95.

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answer the needs of the single part. In "Troubles," a story of a seedy graduate school marriage, Hanna, the neglected wife, comes to understand that her discontents have no identifiable source—they "were deep structures. Or structural defects. Deep, confusing, hard to assign. Cagey. Uncageably cagey"—and that there is no cure—"Energy, talent and hope warred with her life; no relationship and no institution could help. She had the isolation of a pioneer in the circumstance of a soap opera. The only axe she had was the knowledge she was in trouble, that she was down there with the others." Hanna's life is part of a package for which she must accept delivery, even if she is, like another character, "Immense, passionate" and unable to be "contained by any métier."

This double vision, entailing the perception of the self's scope and the limitations imposed by nature and society, informs the eleven small dramas, the "Packages," of the book. To Mr. Stern's credit he sustains the tension, resisting the easier responses of pity or rage or cynical irony. Holding hard to both truths, he rather prefers an accommodating, gentle humor; although no one is condescended to—whether it is a Chicago bus driver, neglected by his wife and family on his fiftieth birthday; or a son who disposes of his mother's cremated remains in a city garbage can; or a group of academics and their infantile lusts and ambitions. Mr. Stern's lucidity, together with his capacity for affection and the comic, are very rare qualities, shortages in contemporary literature. The informed reading public, at least, wants its fictive realities uncontaminated by an author's suggestion that human character is greater than its circumstances, or that the condition itself has its goodness, or that anyone should be forgiven or tolerated. That Mr. Stern continues to offer these consolations in a body of work, which now contains nine major fictions, tells us of his artistic integrity.

An economy of narration and a singleness of vision have their aesthetic disadvantages, especially in a book of short fiction in which most of the selections run from one to two thousand words. In reading Raymond Carver's second volume of stories,[4] while one is impressed, even stunned at times, by the brevity and harshness of the material, one begins, soon enough, to feel imposed upon by a monotony of tone, theme, and structure. Like Ann Beattie's stories, Mr. Carver's, when taken separately, have a power which is difficult to resist. Read together, however, these seventeen pieces (some are not really stories) put one out of sorts—an effect, I suspect, the author intends. But one's discomfort does not result from having to face new and unbearable truths. The theme of the inevitable and unrelieved loss of love, friendship, youth, and marriage is common enough. Rather, the cumulative effect of the book impoverishes the reader by reducing the world to a few realities. By concentrating exclusively on the disconnectedness, paucity, and sorrow of modern existence, Mr. Carver succeeds not in expanding the powers of feeling—and, there-

[4] WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE, by *Raymond Carver.* Knopf. $9.95

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fore, of perception—but in shrinking them. Less is not more in his case.

Underneath all his stories, many told in an alcoholic haze, lies a sense of betrayal; that life has not fulfilled its early promise of peace, order, and love. On the contrary, as one grows older, one is left with a broken marriage, a house full of unwanted furniture, and an inability to understand what has happened. Mr. Carver's fiction, then, records the great disenchantment of the middle class. Assured from birth that all will be well if they do what they're told, the children of that class are unprepared for sorrow, much less tragedy. In response they make do with booze and self-pity. In "Gazebo" Holly and Duane, past their prime and their dreams, are managing a motel, because it is a deal "You couldn't beat . . . with a stick." Their marriage besmirched by Duane, who dallies with the cleaning woman, Juanita, they lock themselves in a room and ignore their customers. The story begins: "That morning she pours Teacher's over my belly and licks it off. That afternoon she tries to jump out the window." At the end Holly reminisces about a time, early in their marriage, when they stopped at a farm house outside Yakima for a drink of water:

> "Can you imagine us doing that now? Going up to a house and asking for a drink of water?
>
> "Those old people must be dead now," she goes, "side by side out there in some cemetery. You remember they asked us in for cake? And later on they showed us around? And there was this gazebo there out back? It was out back under some trees? It had a little peaked roof and the paint was gone and there were these weeds growing up over the steps. And the woman said that years before, I mean a real long time ago, men used to come around and play music out there on a Sunday, and the people would sit and listen. I thought we'd be like that too when we got old enough. Dignified. And in a place. And people would come to our door."

That kind of whimper is Mr. Carver's common concluding refrain. Touching, perhaps, but not very moving or cogent—particularly after the seventeenth time.

In Leonard Michaels' novella,[5] there are no whimpers, only feral roars. Literally. During a long tedious night, seven supposedly typical California males—a psychotherapist, the host; a doctor; a professor, the narrator; an attorney; a basketball player; a real estate dealer; and a business man—swap tawdry tales of sexual misadventure, gorge themselves on food and wine, and wreck the furniture. Afterwards, the assembled group, the "Men's Club," begins to howl, like wolves, first individually and then in a pack:

> We sounded lost, but I thought we'd found ourselves. I mean nothing psychological. No psycho-logic of the soul, only the mind, and this was

[5] THE MEN'S CLUB, by *Leonard Michaels.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $10.95.

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> mindless. The table's treasure lay spilled and glittering at our feet and we howled, getting better at it as the minutes passed, entering deeply into our sound, and I felt more and more separated from myself, closer to the others, until it seemed we were one in the rising howls, rising again and again, taking us up even as we sank toward primal dissolution, assenting to it with this music of common animality, like a churchly chorus, singing of life and death.

This is their reaction to feelings of abandonment and domestication. The women, now "liberated," have left them to their selves, unverified and tamed. At the very end, after the host's wife, Nancy, returns to her savaged house and spoils their song, they beat it in a pickup truck, heading from Berkeley to San Francisco for breakfast, passing around the sacramental joint, singing now of their host, the Jolly Good Fellow. Nancy is left in her room "smashing [a pot] against the floor, the noise changing as it smashed a rug, bare boards, a wall, and then came breaking glass. Then it stopped. We heard the sobbing." How satisfying for the Men's Club that image of the hysterical woman! In the truck the professor: " 'Where are we going?' I screamed. Not for answer; just to scream."

A question persists, after one finishes the book, of what response Mr. Michaels wants from the reader. The satire of his characters' California "life-style" is brutal, if a cartoon; their sexual bravado reveals them as timid and empty, incapable of affection; and their wolfish gluttony and vandalism show them in all their infantilism. Still, at the conclusion, the author appears to celebrate their release from their own meager individualities, the dissolution of their weak "feminine" egos (one character is described as having a hair style once worn by little girls; while another is said to have a "face of an infant surprised by senility"); and to affirm their achievement of a primitive bonding—or at least as near as one can get to such a relationship in Berkeley. But if Mr. Michaels' attitude is ambiguous, constituting the novella's major flaw, it confirms, at last, the men's attempt to slough off their ordinary selves and to return to a "real" masculinity.

The Men's Club is a book of desperation, if not of despair. It is also informed by disgust, designed to instill loathing in the reader for all forms of social life, including sexuality. Mr. Michaels' own desperation can be seen in his reluctance to assume a certain, moral perspective, in his failure to suggest that his characters have interior beings, and in his inability to differentiate among them. All too often the reader is thoroughly confused as to who is speaking or acting. They all merge, despite the fact of their various professions and backgrounds, into a single primal scream. Now, these techniques may be a part of the author's strategy, developed to imply the mindless and spiritless condition of the professional middle class. If so, they don't work. What is required in fiction, just as in any form of art or thought, is clarity, depth, and genuine seriousness. Mr. Michaels does identify a grave moral disorder in our culture. But it is an inadequate art that limits itself to a jeering shrug—or worse, to celebrating incoherence itself.

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Moving from Mr. Michaels' fiction to Barbara Pym's is something like being lifted out of an orgone box and placed on the front stoop of Berggasse 19. Hers is a world of repression, which both pains the self and permits it to survive, relatively secure from the forces that would absorb it. The focus is on the female whose ability to persist is even more heroic than the male's, because she is denied his opportunity for variety and liberty, limited though those advantages are. Having learned from birth to suffer the curtailment of pleasure, Miss Pym's women, moreover, have grown in courage and self-sufficiency superior to men. The bitter irony is that the female still must wait on the male's call. But even if she is never beckoned, she retains the resources to remain alone, distinct, and individual. The professional middle class men of her novels have no such strength; alone they turn foolish and disoriented, needing a woman, if only to make the tea and type their research papers. Nonetheless, for Miss Pym, despite the fact that the woman must assume an ostensibly subservient position in any coupling, she is better off with a man, since she can find at least some pleasure, and hence some dignity, in the relationship. Besides, with the right kind of man, one who is willing to settle in, she is safer than when she is alone. In Miss Pym's world as in Freud's, it is the case, as Imlac told Rasselas, that "Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed."

Yet there is something to be enjoyed, as we see in her recently re-issued novel,[6] first published in 1955. Now all but three of her nine novels are available in America. *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Jane and Prudence,* her first works, besides *No Fond Return of Love,* are yet to arrive. *Less Than Angels* is particularly welcome, since it may be her best. It is a more richly humorous and generous book than the ones she wrote immediately before her death. It also offers the prospect of a number of compensating pleasures, some moderate, others rather exotic, designed to allay the discontents of a highly civilized life.

Near the beginning of the novel two silly graduate students in anthropology "stopped outside a cinema and were gazing at a poster which showed a young woman . . . reclining seductively in a transparent negligée across what seemed to be Niagara Falls. 'I have that seminar paper to prepare,' said Mark reluctantly. 'Yes, of course,' said Digby meekly." Their muted sexual ache for Marilyn Monroe, their begrudging resignation, and their recourse to work suggest the central, although unstated, drama of the novel. It is the sad condition of middling Englishmen, unwilling heirs of Victorian morality and decorum, in the 1950s. The situation of women is, of course, more frustrating. These young anthropologists, like their grandfathers, have the prospect of field work in Africa to look forward to. Catherine Oliphant, the heroine, who thinks of herself as Jane Eyre, has only the vague possibility of some Rochester to pursue. That she finds him, decked out in an African fertility mask in a suburban garden, is her good fortune, a reward earned for her steadfastness. Ob-

[6] LESS THAN ANGELS, by *Barbara Pym.* Dutton. $10.95.

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served from an adjoining house by a widow and a spinster, with whom she has been staying since the death of Tom Mallows, her apparently platonic lover, a young anthropologist who was accidentally killed in an African political riot, Catherine joins Alaric Lydgate in a fertility ritual. Rhoda Wellcome, the spinster, reports: " 'They're going right to the bottom of the garden. Now he seems to be cutting something and Catherine is helping him—what *can* they be doing? Why, now she's standing up and her arms are full of rhubarb! What a strange girl she is. . . . What odd turns life does take!' " Still, it is Alaric who is the more fortunate, because "Like so many men, he needed a woman stronger than himself, for behind the harsh cragginess of the Easter Island façade cowered the small boy, uncertain of himself."

If this last notion is condescending and snobbish, it is also somehow a necessary protection for women to adopt against the power of the male in such a society. If Catherine Oliphant, an orphan, yearns for a husband and a family, as well as for suburbia, she also realizes the dangers to her self in those mergers. If secure pleasure, therefore, is a necessity, so is independence. To be avoided, on the one hand, is the loss of the self in sexuality and institutions; to be feared, on the other, is the diminishment entailed in repression and disconnectedness. Striking a balance between the needs of pleasure and of autonomy constitutes the spiritual adventure of the modern self. That Barbara Pym can imagine the achievement of such an effort, done with grace and humor, is itself a rare accomplishment in contemporary literature. It also should alert the reader to the fact that her comic novels of manners are informed by a subtle intelligence that is serious, germane, and, more than anything else, healthy.

In Toni Morrison's novel[7] there is every reason to despair of the relationship between black men and women. They have been lost to one another. "Each," as the narrator says, "was pulling the other away from the maw of hell—its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" In New York City, "The black girls . . . were crying and their men were looking neither to the right nor to the left. Not because they were heedless, or intent on what was before them, but they did not wish to see the crying, crying girls split into two parts by their tight jeans, screaming at the top of their high, high heels, straining against the pull of their braids and the fluorescent combs, holding their hair." Nor does Miss Morrison seem to be able to imagine any kind of reconciliation, only an awful rending, in which the women go alone into the world and the men return to a mythical past, beyond culture. Both, at any rate, must wrench free from the "tar baby," which holds them in a tight, destructive embrace.

While the deterioration of black relationships exists at the center of this

[7] TAR BABY, by *Toni Morrison.* Knopf. $11.95.

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disturbing novel, it is only part of Miss Morrison's morose sense of a total cultural breakdown. The story itself takes place in the Caribbean on *Isle des Chevaliers,* where Valerian Street, a retired Philadelphia candy manufacturer, and his wife Margaret, once the "Principal Beauty of Maine," are served by two black retainers, Sydney and Odine Childs, themselves a part of the family for fifty-one years. It is a house of exile, Mr. Street having become a stranger to Philadelphia and America. To them comes, first, Jadine, the Childses' niece, a beautiful and sophisticated model, who has been expensively raised and educated by the Streets. She has fled from Paris and the question of whether to marry a white European. But Jadine also returns home shaken, after she has been spit upon by a proud African woman in a yellow native costume for denying her blackness. It is a magnificent and powerfully described scene.

Next, "Son," a renegade American black, wild and fearsome, the kind of man Jadine has forgotten existed, forces his way into the Street's home, and is inexplicably welcomed there by Valerian. Son introduces them all to denied realities—blackness, the Childses' servitude, the Streets's own lost and abused son, and to violent passion. Inevitably, Jadine and Son become lovers and leave for America where they first stay in New York, trying to get him admitted to S.U.N.Y. or C.U.N.Y. Afterwards, they visit Son's hometown, Eloe, Florida, where blacks live according to a rhythm and a traditional morality which Jadine cannot tolerate. Eventually, she loses all hope of culturing or domesticating Son, and so leaves for Paris, after a brief return to the Caribbean. Along the elaborate way, Miss Morrison has shown us an "inauthentic" (one of her favorite words) civilization which corrupts natural beauty and forces people into delusion and retreat. Freedom has been betrayed.

The author's response to both the personal and cultural crisis of the book is perplexing, if not confused, and seriously qualifies the achievement of the novel. Besides prescribing the radical separation of men and women and of the races, Miss Morrison seems to suggest that Jadine, after all, has not betrayed herself by trying to live in a white world and that she must return to Paris "and begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and with all the night women who *looked* at her. No more shoulders and limitless chests. No more dreams of safety. No more. . . . A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She was the safety she longed for." Just how this judgment is to be taken, when throughout the novel Jadine's alienation from her black sources is viewed as a moral and spiritual defect, one forcefully pointed to by Son and the visit to Eloe, escapes me. Even more unsatisfying is how Miss Morrison disposes of Son. After he pursues Jadine to the Caribbean and fails to find her, he joins the "race of the blind people," the mythical descendants of the first slaves, on a deserted island. There he will be freed from Jadine's clutches and his American blackness. It is a symbolic solution which doesn't answer to the realistic social and moral problems raised in the novel. Miss Morrison's failure to explain her shifting attitude toward Jadine and black culture, and her sudden introduction of a mythic symbol

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in dealing with Son are evidence of her unwillingness to think these difficult matters through. And that is most unfortunate, since the novel is a serious and artful attempt to dramatize a cultural malaise of great magnitude.

Along frontiers, the efforts of imagination, mind, and will often appear fruitless, if not absurd. In "shallow-rooted" towns, where human and natural violence mock even the most ordinary of endeavors, like housekeeping, the temptation frequently presents itself to let go and surrender to drift. Of course, such yearnings for impermanence are not confined to those who live at the edge of things. They are shared by the citizens of great cities too, where violence and disaster are common enough. In cities, whose monuments and culture are built on layers of the past, the inhabitants are surrounded, however, by the evidence of the relative success of the race, if not of the individual, to transcend the law of mutability. Still, taking the long view, Vienna, London, and New York are merely examples of human vanity. Because, as the narrator of Marilynne Robinson's dire and provocative first novel[8] says, "a diaspora threatened always," it may be foolish to build monuments, or even to keep house. "It is better," at least according to Ruth, the narrator, "to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing." There is also less suffering in the avoidance of possession and the attempt to preserve, precluding as it does the possibility of tragedy. To join, without resistance, the drift toward inevitable extinction eases, besides, the burdens of consciousness and self-definition.

Housekeeping, then, concerns the wisdom of not keeping a house. Indeed, at the conclusion, the narrator and her aunt, Sylvie, set fire to the family home, having neglected it for years in their desire to let it go back to nature. It is also a novel about women deserted by or abandoning men. The story begins before Ruth's birth when the train on which her grandfather is riding plunges from a high bridge into a deep lake outside Fingerbone, Idaho. Her grandmother, her mother, and her aunt are left alone to maintain the order of the house. For a time they do, sleeping "on starched sheets under layers of quilts, and in the morning [their] curtains filled with light the way sails fill with wind." But the daughters soon leave Fingerbone to marry. Helen, Ruth's mother, returns without her husband and abandons her two daughters to the care of the grandmother, after which she drives her car into the lake. The sisters are raised first by their grandmother, and then, after her death, by two spinster great-aunts from Spokane, who enjoyed "nothing except habit and familiarity, the precise replication of one day in the next." They are soon replaced by Sylvie who has spent, since the end of her marriage, her life on the road. A transient, "she seldom removed her coat, and every story she told had to do with a train or a bus station."

The novel proper involves Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille, the other sister, and their attempt to maintain themselves against the incursions of bliz-

[8] HOUSEKEEPING, by *Marilynne Robinson.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $10.95.

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zards and floods as well as the pressure of the town's people to return to ordinary society. In some sense, the battle takes place between Fingerbone and Sylvie over Ruth's and Lucille's souls. Lucille, who is "of the common persuasion," and hates "everything that had to do with transience," is lost to the town, while Ruth is won over to the life of drift. She and her aunt become "bag ladies": "I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping. Sylvie set fire to the straw of the broom, and held it blazing to the hem of the pantry curtain, and to the fringes of the rug, so there were two good fires, but then we heard a train whistle, and Sylvie said, 'We have to run! Get your coat!' I did, and pulled on my boots."

If Mrs. Robinson's celebration of an achieved liberty from culture and from its expectations for the self is taken far enough, it would seem to call into question the very act of making a novel. At one point Ruth does say that "There is remembrance, and communion, altogether human and unhallowed. For families will not be broken. Curse and expel them, send their children wandering, drown them in floods and fires, and old women will make songs out of all these sorrows and sit on the porches and sing them on mild evenings. Every sorrow suggests a thousand songs, and every song recalls a thousand sorrows, and so they are infinite in number and all the same." Yet later she concludes: "It had never occurred to me that words, too, must be salvaged, though when I thought about it, it seemed obvious. It was absurd to think that things were held in place, are held in place, by a web of words." Those contemporary writers who rush to hold up the authenticating principle of nature as opposed to the "lie" of civilization, including that of language, should consider, I should think, the odd paradox that arises between their avowed point of view and their artistic vocation.

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J. E. CHAMBERLIN

The Death of Pierrot

ASKED WHETHER HE EVER SAW VISIONS, Beardsley replied "No. I do not allow myself to see them except on paper." For an artist so stubbornly fanciful, Aubrey Beardsley had a surprisingly realistic streak, what Max Beerbohm referred to as "that stony commonsense which always came upmost when anyone canvassed the fantastic in him." It gave his conversation something of its offhand charm, and his drawing much of its popular appeal. It often saved him from the slough of despond in which so many of his contemporaries wallowed, and it almost always gave the insidious revelations of his art the quality of found objects. And although it could not keep him alive, it gave him an extraordinary ability to work in the shadow of death for much of his short time as an artist.

Beardsley's career was remarkable, partly because (like much that was best about the period) it was paradoxically both highly individual and quite typical of its time and place. Despite his distinctive style and interests, his reputation in some ways became entangled with that of Oscar Wilde. He had done the illustrations for *Salome,* which effectively announced him as a "decadent" artist to be reckoned with; and he took up the role in a thoroughly Victorian way by becoming art editor—a kind of *maître d'hôtel de décadence*—first of *The Yellow Book,* which went down with Wilde (even though he never contributed to it) and then of *The Savoy,* a successor edited by Arthur Symons and diligently contributed to by Beardsley even when he was unmistakably dying.

There was much speculation at this time about the autonomy of art, and the vulnerability of life; and there was a great deal of interest in crossing over boundaries—boundaries among the arts, and between art and life, vice and virtue, France and England. W. B. Yeats put Beardsley, along with Ernest Dowson and Charles Baudelaire, in Phase Thirteen of *A Vision,* the phase supposedly characteristic of the "tragic generation" of the 1890s. It was a congenial gathering. There was Baudelaire on the one hand, with his impossible allegiance to "*luxe, calme et volupté*"; his affection for the sinuous lineage of beauty and ugliness, virtue and vice; and his genius for the sacrificial and the sardonic. And there was Dowson, like many of his contemporaries addicted to addiction, and to the image of Pierrot; catching the spirit of his own age in phrases which caught the nostalgic fancy of another—days of wine and roses, gone with the wind, falls the shadow.

Beardsley's ambivalence was typical in this regard, but there is a particular curiosity here. When talking about Beardsley and his time, one talks about Beardsley and the writers, much more than the artists, of the period. One could say that this is because there were not many artists, certainly not English ones, and anyway they are not as well known as the

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writers. This is partly true. Also, it is true, Beardsley was primarily an illustrator of texts, and a literary context is therefore the appropriate one. But even among illustrators, there is a distinctively literary quality about Beardsley's work, an invitation to what is generally a literary analysis, that tends to skew discussion about him. Most of all, there are two facts: the simple fact that Beardsley's associations were more usually and more permanently with writers than with artists; and the complicated fact that Beardsley always wanted to be a writer, perhaps from time to time even more than he wanted to be an artist. His first published work was a prose, rather than a pen and ink, sketch, which appeared in January 1890, and coincided with the first of the attacks of tubercular hemorrhage—the "continual leaking," as Beardsley called it—which provided the story of his life and death over the next eight years. At the time, he was trying to "crush out" the instinct to draw, ostensibly (and here is that stony commonsense) because writing paid, while drawing had not yet done so.[1] Fortunately, Beardsley's drawing would not be crushed out, and by the spring of 1890 he had given in to what he called the "inevitable" (he also had a stony commonsense in the romantic tradition). But throughout his career, he kept turning back to literary possibilities, pestering Symons in particular with his latest verses, or with the rather better prose sections of the unfinished *Under the Hill,* the story of the return of Tannhäuser to the Venusberg.

Whatever of the writer *manqué* there was in Beardsley, there was much more of the English artist who found himself in the traditions of English art and design, and who found a number (though by no means all) of his subjects in English literature. Like many of his artistic contemporaries, he was characteristically English insofar as he ignored the limitations of being fogbound on an island off the coast of France, and he saw the English Channel primarily as the way to get to Dieppe and Paris. To some extent, he belonged in the company of the eighteenth century illustrators with whom he had so much in common; and he belonged in a special way in the company of Blake, whose "flaming line"—elegant and tense—Nicholas Pevsner used to identify as signifying something of the Englishness of English art.

Miriam J. Benkovitz has written a remarkably straightforward biography of Beardsley.[2] It is almost as though she does not understand the fashion in biographies, though she has certainly written enough of them to do so. All of the familiar elements are missing. Beardsley's life is not as-

[1] There is a fine opportunity for a Marxist analysis of this unlikely period. Ezra Pound turned his attention to this, but he was never really interested in modes of production. It is surely curious that many of the finest artists became book illustrators and poster makers, entertainers and advertisers. In concluding an article on "The New Art: The Art of the Poster" in the first (and last—December 1894) issue of *The Chameleon,* Charles Hiatt noted that "it may seem a trivial matter, but, looking to the fact that we are commercial or nothing, it is no small thing to express the soul of commerce in art."

[2] AUBREY BEARDSLEY: An Account of His Life, by *Miriam J. Benkovitz.* Putnam's. $11.95.

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signed its distinctive organic structure, independent of the obvious passing from birth to death; and no particular vital force is discovered to explain the direction and pace of his artistic career. There is no turning to literary analysis, or to art criticism; and there is no genuine speculation on the imaginative purposes and energies informing Beardsley's life and work. Benkovitz provides, quite simply, "an account of his life"; and since Beardsley's was, on the whole, a rather colourless life, the account is correspondingly restrained. It is a restraint which it is easy to interpret as incompetence or timidity, but which eventually becomes rather awesome. How could anyone resist so many delicious invitations to indulge, not necessarily in the salacious but just in the historical, or the anecdotal? It is an inspiring performance, in its way. There is none of the gossipy compassion that has become the rage, though she clearly admires her subject; and certainly there is nothing of the relish of the voyeur in Benkovitz' account. Moreover, while there is a fairly detailed chronology, it is carefully shaved down to fit in with specific events or circumstances in Beardsley's life, as though life were only a series of events. The result is at first quite irritating, then boring, and finally fascinating, as the chronicle takes on an imperative of its own, conditioned by a death that is imminent for most of Beardsley's adult life. Even then, the biography is much more disconnected than life must have been for Beardsley, and yet does not make the points it might about the discontinuities which really mattered. The drawings for *Salome,* and especially "The Climax," are alluded to as marking a significant stage in Beardsley's development, but discussion of the significance is very limited, and "The Climax" is not even included in the illustrations Benkovitz provides. Over a third of the illustrations are photographs, almost outnumbering the examples of his own works. It is an atrocious imbalance. In fact, this is a book so unlike its subject as to be almost defiant, yet so constrained as to be almost baroque in its evasions . . . and in that, possibly, it captures something of the mannerist tension of Beardsley's own life and work.

I mentioned Beardsley's adult life. Some would claim that he had none, and that he exemplified a condition that fascinated those interested in the behaviour of artists, criminals, the insane, and other degenerates, the condition of arrested development. (Wilde, turning the notion around, said in one of his "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" that "any preoccupation with ideas of what is right or wrong shows an arrested intellectual development.") Certainly, Beardsley had an adolescent enthusiasm for loitering about the sweet shop, but his indecency was much too confident, and his tactlessness much too deliberate, and too negotiable, to be dismissed in this way. Furthermore, it was not even his favourite pose. As Symons remarked, "one of his poses . . . one of those things, that is, in which he was most sincere, was his care in outwardly conforming to the conventions which make for elegance and restraint; his necessity of dressing well, of showing no sign of the professional artist." Beardsley's poses were devious, but all in a common mode, from the urbane man of fashion to variations on William Morris' "idle

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singer of an empty day." Theatre, and the play of likenesses, of acting in the natural guise of some figure or another, appealed to him as much as the artifice of unlikenesses, the possibilities of disguise. The nineteenth century provided a mask that wonderfully confused these two aspects, the ubiquitous pantomime of Pierrot, the *zanni* who had in the early eighteenth century modified the stupid disenchantment of an obsequious Harlequin with the neurotic anxieties of a disinherited Prince Hamlet. He became the image of alienation for Beardsley's contemporaries. His condition varied from witty egotism to suicidal ennui, from explicit desire to vague longing. There was urbane panic here—Dionysus come to town—yet also sly resignation—Ulysses wandering home. Beardsley caught both moods. His earliest work was, as he described it, "something suggestive of Japan, but not really japonesque. Words fail to describe the quality of the workmanship. The subjects were quite mad and a little indecent. Strange hermaphroditic creatures wandering about in Pierrot costumes or modern dress; quite a new world of my own creation." His later work could be described in much the same way, with the volume turned up. And words continue to fail to describe its quality. The androgynous mysteries to which Walter Pater referred in his Renaissance essays, or those embodied in Simeon Solomon's paintings, found an intuitive dominion in the work of Aubrey Beardsley. There was from the first an intimation of knowledge, of knowingness, about his work that startled many, even of those who admired it. Wilde caught the spirit of it when he inscribed a copy of *Salome* "For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance."

In 1910, Roger Fry organized an exhibition on "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" at the Grafton Galleries in London. There was a sensational reaction, with Robert Ross (a close friend of both Beardsley and Wilde) suggesting that the paintings, like "the source of the plague," should be burned; and Charles Ricketts (illustrator of Wilde's *The Sphinx*, among other things, and editor of *The Dial*) replying that the pictures should rather be preserved, as of interest to "the doctors of the body and the students of the sickness of the soul," but the catalogue should be burned. The exhibition (which did not include work in Beardsley's mode) focussed on Manet, of course, and on Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh. In doing so, it established the basis not just for an academic but for the popular view of the original greatness of modern art. Fry's exhibition was in many ways precipitated by the publication in 1908 of Julius Meier-Graefe's *Modern Art* in an English translation. It was a book that determined the canon upon which Fry relied. As well, it gave to Beardsley a central place in the development of a distinctly modern sensibility. Meier-Graefe had praised Manet for his "recognition of painting as flat decoration," so it was perhaps inevitable that he would like Beardsley. But he did more than just admire him, giving to Beardsley the pleasures of a "circle," and the dignity of a chapter, in his discussion of "The

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Struggle for Style" in English and Continental art. Beardsley's legacy from Edward Burne-Jones in particular and from Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasms in general was one which Beardsley himself always acknowledged, and Meier-Graefe accordingly began his consideration there. He then moved on to suggest that Beardsley's significance consisted in

> the fact that he was able to give objectivity and therefore style to the whole practice of this period of English art . . . Of a hundred important artists born within so many years, a certain number are indispensable, not because they produce this or that effect upon the mind, but because they affect their age and because they are symbolical of ourselves . . . These men, in one word, give us knowledge; they are themselves concentrated knowledge. Beardsley is one of them, and to have seen every one of his fragments is a more urgent necessity than to know a single picture by Burne-Jones or Watts, even were the works of these artists ten times more beautiful than they are. To follow the evolution of art is interesting and certainly more useful and dignified than to collect postage stamps or to play piquet, but at the same time a knowledge of certain contemporary artists is wholly indispensable. Not until we have learnt to understand Beardsley or Dostojewski or Manet as we understand Bismarck, shall we reach the stage of culture. The point is not whether these men were artists, statesmen, or anything else; they have our age at their fingers' ends, each in the art peculiar to himself.

This was, transparently, a contemporary view; but it was also an important and influential one. "All great art is eccentric to the conservative multitude," wrote Robert Ross in his book on the eccentric Beardsley, published in 1909 (the year before Ross joined the conservative multitude condemning Fry's great exhibition). Ross had a good sense of Beardsley's unique art, referring to its "intensely reminiscent, ingeniously retrospective" character, its appeal not "to experience but to expression," and its "mordant humour," allied to "a certain fescennine abstraction which sometimes offends." Fescennine? From Fescennia in Etruria, where scurrilous dialogues in verse were once the rage. Just the sort of precious touch that Beardsley would have liked. Fry, who liked Beardsley but with many more reservations than Ross displayed, emphasized (in *Vision and Design*) what he saw as the deliberate side of Beardsley, noting that "there is even a touch of hieratic austerity and pomp in his style, as becomes the arch-priest of a Satanic cultus. He has, indeed, all the stigmata of the religious artist—the love of pure decoration, the patient elaboration and enrichment of surface, the predilection for flat tones and precision of contour, the want of the sense of mass and relief, the extravagant richness of invention." Miriam Benkovitz, who is apparently desperate to keep her distance from such speculation—there is nothing of this in her book—can only come up with a reference to what she calls Beardsley's "spatial and very subtle ambiguity, a tension between black and white which developed later, in other artists, as abstraction." But even this is misleading.

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Beardsley worked within a tradition in which not just black and white, but naturalism and abstraction, the romantic and the classical, the mimetic and the expressive, the beautiful and the grotesque, provided complementary and even interchangeable categories. To paraphrase Nietzsche, the artist paints nature faithfully by painting what he likes about it. And what does he like? He likes what he can paint. Naturalism and abstraction are perspectives on ways of seeing and on ways of making, informed by ways of imagining. Nature imitating art rather than art imitating nature, as Wilde insisted. And the decorative impulse is, from this perspective, the purest artistic impulse because the most naturally abstract, the most powerfully expressive of personality while at the same time the most genuinely imitative of thoughts and feelings. If the artist's vocabulary is form and colour—and most especially if it is line—then abstraction and naturalism come together. This was the burden of Wassily Kandinsky's polemic in his manifesto on abstraction, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art.* And it brings us back to the most compelling feature of Beardsley's work, its graphic "vocabulary." The fact is that this can be termed either a vocabulary of character and emotional (often erotic) gestures or one of lines and spaces depending simply on whether we view Beardsley's art as naturalistic or abstract, as mimetic or expressive, as illustrative or decorative. Verlaine's witty designation of *symbolistes* as *cymbalistes* catches this ambivalence nicely.

E. H. Gombrich once argued that there is no neutral naturalism. Neither is there any neutral abstraction. Both modes undertake a transaction from the personality of the artist to the imagination of the perceiver by means of a limited set of stereotypes—common currencies, if you will—which transcend historical or generic categories, and national boundaries, and moral proprieties. Beardsley's genius was to develop an art in which suggestions of an abstract vocabulary reinforce naturalistic or representative stereotypes, and suggestions of caricature reinforce stereotypical abstract images. It is an art preeminently of gestures, and it lends itself splendidly to satire. It sustains a tension between what is revealed and what is concealed, and because of this it always seems to be about to reveal secrets, which are never explicitly disclosed. One mode of explicitness merely raises intimations of another mode of covert implication. There is almost a religious quality about this, though not the one that Fry proposed. It is as though an imminent annunciation were being confirmed by a nonchalant and antinomian observer. There is neither the independent imperative about Beardsley's work that would require us to commit ourselves to a particular kind of response, nor is there much possibility for agreement about what it is that is being announced. To this substantive uncertainty is added what might be called an uncertainty of style. (It should be emphasized that "style" was by no means an incidental category during this period. Pater had referred to it as conveying the soul of the artist; and a "psychology of style" was what many art historians were trying to achieve in order to define typical artistic modes and aesthetic responses.) Beardsley's style was deliberate in its excess, and teasing in its

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austerity, like the art of caricature which it often raised to new levels. His style subtly confused vision and design, in a complex interplay of ostentation and restraint. Beardsley combined economy of line with extravagant detail, thereby heightening the effect (and the charm) of each; and he juxtaposed intimation with explication, or the intimate with the explicit, thereby increasing the possibilities of both. Finally, there is that intangible, hovering unease, most easily discussed with reference to the subjects of the drawings, but distinctive also in their style: a combination of sinister delight and moral imperiousness, a savouring both of piety and power.

Benkovitz, like many others, draws attention to the Japanese quality in Beardsley's work, a quality which was certainly evident in much of the best art work of the late nineteenth century, and especially in impressionism and art nouveau. The influence was pervasive, and facilitated by the taste for oriental prints, porcelain and decorative devices. The de Goncourts were early popularizers, as was Jimmy Whistler, and Beardsley's work certainly developed in this milieu. But there were other reinforcements to the line of development of his deliberately ornamental interests, from Mantegna to Owen Jones and John Ruskin; and the purely decorative quality of Beardsley's work needs a reasonably subtle analysis to take account of the variety of artistic activities and interests in the period, and of Beardsley's own interest in specifically tonal effects. Furthermore, anyone really anxious to base an analysis of Beardsley on the Japanese elements in his style should, for example, recall that the Utamaro prints which hung on Beardsley's walls in his rooms in London in the early 1890s were notable not only for their decorative delicacy but also for their explicit eroticism. What Beerbohm said of Beardsley might well apply to Utamaro's fantasies: "All the greatest fantastic art postulates the power to see things, unerringly, as they are."

"Such splendid things I had planned out too," wrote Beardsley to H. C. J. Pollitt a few weeks before his death. Throughout his last couple of years, when he was almost constantly ill, he managed to keep an astonishing control over himself, and maintained his sense of humour as well as his sense of vocation. Most of all, he maintained his sense of himself, a sense which is primarily available to us in his work. He converted to Catholicism the year before he died; and near the end he ordered Leonard Smithers, his publisher, to destroy all his obscene drawings. Beardsley was blessed with some good friends. For the last years of his life, André Raffalovich was his patron, and supplied him with money for which no service was required other than a tactful gratitude and loyalty (which in practice meant avoiding Wilde, whom Raffalovich disliked). Other friends gave him advances or gifts of money, while Beardsley made himself scarce to those (such as his tailor, and several landlords and hoteliers) to whom he owed substantial sums. When he died, he left over £1000 to his sister Mabel. No one, till then, knew that he had any money at all set aside. Stony commonsense indeed.

Recollecting Beardsley's drawing *The Death of Pierrot* (from *The Savoy*,

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No. 6, 1896), Meier-Graefe brings together Aubrey Beardsley and his art in a way that catches the spirit of his life and death.

> When I saw the news of his death at Menton (on March 16, 1898, at the age of 25), I remembered a four-post bed with a high lace-trimmed canopy under which Pierrot seems to be asleep. His head is sunk in the pillow, the long thin hand which so often guided the mad dance lies wearily upon the counterpane: a motley company approaches solemnly on tiptoe. Columbine comes first in a high black mantilla, her hooped skirts seamed with roses, and under them her saucy leg, peeping out from drawers indicated by dots; then Harlequin in a white domino with his mask before his cunning eyes, tiptoeing forward in beautifully embroidered tights. Then follow the worthy Doctor and the fantastic Pantaloon in his wide velvet breeches and Spanish doublet. Columbine listens to the breathing of Pierrot and motions the others to silence with her finger upon her little mouth; Harlequin, too, is taken aback and lays a monitory finger on his lips, the doctor stands stiff and dignified, while Pantaloon bows his head breathlessly. Thus they stand upon tiptoe, scarce daring to look, and listen as Pierrot's spirit gently leaves his audacious body.

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GEORGE CORE

Making Book on the Language

WRITING ABOUT THE LANGUAGE is fraught with risk—which is to say that only a fool or a madman undertakes this job in a cocksure or blithely optimistic spirit. "The English language is always sticking a foot out to trip a man," E. B. White observed in 1937. Having duly noted the difficulties of the terrain, I now mount the hobbyhorse of my theme; and I will endeavor not to ride off in all directions at once.

Before us stands a large array of reference books,[1] for the most part precisely the kind of books that no careful writer ignores. First are dictionaries, chiefly specialized; then come books about the language, principally on usage; and finally loom *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations,* in its fifteenth edition that celebrates the 125th anniversary of this drayhorse, and *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations,* the rival and interloper that Oxford began publishing a mere forty years ago, now in its third edition.

The heroines of Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth, a popular nineteenth-century American writer, were said to have swallowed unabridged dictionaries. If you want to discover what dictionaries these worthy ladies devoured to provide sustenance and ballast for their weighty conversation, don't look in *Bartlett's* or its rival. If you tinker with dictionaries to fine-tune your use of the language, don't bother to consult the *Oxford American Dictionary* (1980), one of the worst general dictionaries that I have ever encountered and not merely because it doesn't include the mechanic's term *fine-tune.* This dictionary is superfluous because everything new that it presumably offers is done better—more accurately and fully—in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1978), a superb but little noticed compilation of "colloquial, idiomatic, and technical English," and *The Second Barnhart Dictionary of New English* (1980), which "records international English" and "is first a tool for users of English and word enthusiasts." The *Oxford American Dictionary* tells you that *ayatollah* means "a chief leader of Shiite Muslims," but *Barnhart*'s illustration specifies the

[1] THE SECOND BARNHART DICTIONARY OF NEW ENGLISH, ed. *Clarence I. Barnhart* et al. Harper & Row. $19.95. BARTLETT'S FAMILIAR QUOTATIONS, ed. *Sally Morison Beck.* 15th edition. Little, Brown. $24.95. A BROWSER'S DICTIONARY, by *John Ciardi.* Harper & Row. $16.95. AMERICAN USAGE AND STYLE, by *Roy H. Copperud.* Van Nostrand Reinhold. $14.95. ERIC PARTRIDGE IN HIS OWN WORDS, ed. *David Crystal.* Macmillan. $13.95. OXFORD AMERICAN DICTIONARY, ed. *Eugene Ehrlich* et al. Oxford University Press. $14.95. WORDS FAIL ME, by *Philip Howard.* Oxford University Press. $13.95. LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH. ed. *Paul Procter* et al. Longman. $12.00. A CONCISE DICTIONARY OF CORRECT ENGLISH, ed. *B. A. Pythian.* Rowman and Littlefield. $10.00; $5.50. AMERICAN TONGUE AND CHEEK, by *Jim Quinn.* Pantheon. $11.95. ON LANGUAGE, by *William Safire.* Times Books. $12.95. THE OXFORD BOOK OF QUOTATIONS, 3rd ed. Oxford University Press. $29.95.

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number of such chiefs in Iran—1200. The *Oxford* dictionary includes *smart bomb* but not *smartass* or even the expression that word seems to be replacing—*smart aleck* (one meaning of which John Ciardi aptly states as "a wise guy who outsmarts himself"). The vexed and vexing verb *lay* as defined by *Oxford* does not include the slang meaning *to relax* (as in *lay back*) or the vulgar meaning *to copulate. Barnhart* provides the first; *Longman*, the second.

A prominent selling point for the *Oxford American Dictionary* is the inclusion of six hundred notes on usage provided for words frequently misused. Hence: "Do not confuse *lay* . . . with *lie*." This note has not been studied by the makers of Williams Lectric Shave, who sponsor a dismal advertisement in which John Havlicek and other college graduates fret over the recalcitrant beard that just lays there. The notes on usage are blandly prescriptive, neither incisive nor especially helpful. For the entry *alternative* we read "Do not confuse *alternative* with *alternate*," but the definition says that *alternative* is "one or two or more possibilities." The purist, such as B. A. Pythian, replies that the noun "denotes either of two possible courses. Strictly speaking, there are never several alternatives, only two."

The person whose addiction to dictionaries is chronic will not find a note on the popular misuse of that word if he consults the *Oxford American Dictionary*. Pythian calls the use of *chronic* to mean *extreme* or *acute* "distinctly slangy," and Roy H. Copperud says *chronic* "is misused in the sense *severe*." Oxford's lexicographers have done a number on someone—perhaps themselves. *Barnhart* lists four meanings of this slang expression (omitted in *Oxford*); among the examples for the second meaning, to "subject to derision or ridicule," is this sentence by William Greider: "There is a real social disadvantage for those of us who are limited to one standard language, and others sometimes do a number on us because of it."

The *Oxford American Dictionary* does contain *impact* as a verb but not the bureaucratic term *impact on*, meaning to affect or influence vigorously. I was appalled to hear this barbarism trotted out with great relish on Dick Cavett's show by one of the most intelligent and best-educated members of Carter's staff, a man who earned a Phi Beta Kappa key in English before he took up federalese. *Barnhart* provides an excellent entry on back formation, which explains the strong tendency to create such verbs. Thus *house-sit*, *safekeep*, and *thermoregulate.*

Perhaps the dominant tendency in the coining of American words can be seen in what is happening to the noun. The noun is the most overworked part of speech in the language: it is used as an adjective and a verb when it is not doing its homely and necessary duty as the name of a person, place, or thing. Cowboys since the 1960s have not only ridden the range but *cowboyed.* ("Ten children survived, and seven of them were boys, and they all cowboyed—except one who roughnecked"—Jane Kramer.) If you must indulge in this fad, remember that in general the noun works better as a verb than as an adjective. But I refuse to defend such new verbs as *access*, *accessorize*, *advantage*, *author*, *delawyer*, *deplane*, *fuel* (and *misfuel*) *chopper* (as in helicopter), and *Watergate*, not to mention *impact on.*

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In this jumpy republic (as Thurber, a wordsmith, used to call it) we fancy ourselves so busy and driven that shorthand is a way of life. Such verbs as *cowboy*, *neighbor*, and *roughneck*, when put to good (but occasional) use by a careful writer like Jane Kramer, admittedly can be effective without being inept or comical or self-important; and they seize upon the metaphoric potency of the language. That is how language must be used—not only properly in the grammatical sense but idiomatically. "Idiom," R. P. Blackmur remarked, "is the twist of truth, the twist, like that of the strands of a rope, which keeps its component fictions together."

In a less grandiose formulation Blackmur said that idiom is "a special and fresh saying, and cannot for its life be said otherwise." He was speaking of poetry and of language. Copperud defines the term exactly: "The forms of expression which are peculiar to a language, in that they often evade the normal rules of grammar and have meanings or implications unconnected with the normal meanings of the words used." That the term is all but missing in William Safire's *On Language* says a good deal about the defects of that engaging but often superficial book. Jim Quinn, a relentless critic of Safire, his English counterpart Philip Howard, Edwin Newman, John Simon, and others whom he calls pop grammarians, has a chapter in *American Tongue and Cheek* entitled "You're Welcome to Using My Idiom" in which he excoriates Wilson Follett, pillorying him as the academic writer who has run amuck.

The academy needs more writers like Follett, and the wider world can do nicely without prodigies of perversity like Quinn, whose appearance as an apologist for popular usage was as predictable as the publication of the latest drugstore romances (now affectionately known as bodice-busters). Quinn, whom White would deem an anything-goes fellow, is saying that Whatever is used in widest commonality is right, and in any case Let everything hang out. The golden mean of usage lies between the extreme positions of the dogmatic prescriptivist (Howard, Simon, et al.) and the unbuttoned descriptivist (Quinn). Quinn goes out of his way to use *hopefully* (for *it is hoped*), *quote* (for *quotation*), *plus* (to begin a sentence), *kind of a*, and various other quasi-literate to barbarous expressions that are clichés at best. Quinn's argument that the language continues to change, dragging conservatives in its wake, is well taken; but none of us can learn much about style and idiom from reading his breezy prose, and his insistence that, for instance, *infer* can properly mean *imply* (*pace* Milton) gets us nowhere but deeper into the morass of sloppy usage. Quinn delights in quoting classic writers who have used expressions and constructions that have been damned by the Simons of the world, but he has ignored the fact that Shakespeare, Defoe, Dickens, and the others were professional writers working against deadlines and writing at reckless speed: hence Jonson's famous complaint that Shakespeare never blotted a line. He also overlooks the difference between dialogue and more formal prose.

Quinn would like to eradicate the distinctions between spoken and written English. He wants us all to slum in print as well as in conversa-

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tion. He inveighs against "hyper-correct dialect," often to good effect; but we still wonder if Quinn isn't the fox guarding the henhouse. He fails to realize that in preserving various dialects, especially black vernacular, we are doing little justice to minorities who can make their way up the ladder of social mobility only by learning to speak and write received standard English, whether or not they slyly do a number on the wasp (waspish?) stuffed shirts who are hopelessly immured in "one standard language." Quinn needs to read his Bible on the Tower of Babel.

No, I am not advocating the overthrow or even the leveling of the vernaculars that provide blood and marrow to the body politic of the language, making it something besides a vast corpus of inflexible meaning and usage. The language isn't a dead sea but is a living stream, as White has said, "perpetually in flux, . . . shifting, changing, receiving new strength from a thousand tributaries, losing old forms in the backwaters of time."

Defining the main stream—and sticking to it—are essential. For Quinn that stream embraces all its tributaries, and none is more correct or proper than any other. For White, Howard, Pythian, Safire, and others like them one does well to avoid the tributaries and backwaters, even though White shrewdly declares that "no idiom is taboo, no accent forbidden," just as almost any lexicographer, especially Partridge, would say. The steady course for White involves careful navigation, not thrashing about in the flotsam and jetsam of cant, patois, jargon, obscenity, slang, and other dubious forms of dialect and vernacular. Any writer must constantly decide what standard of idiomatic propriety to follow—White's or Quinn's. Quinn advocates promiscuity, whose issue, like bastards of every shape and form, must be examined thoroughly. Let the user beware. Quinn's method means that the careless writer can always defend himself by citing another instance of carelessness. But more is lost than is gained when the meanings of words like *flaunt* and *flout* are blurred, as Safire demonstrates in "Floutsmanship." Yet Quinn is right in contending that the history and development of the language can never be charted at any time by rules, no matter how ingenious and elastic.

The language is democratic, even if the vast majority of those who use it accurately and lovingly are elitists. (In his tribute to the late Eric Partridge, Anthony Burgess wisely says that "language is not, like everything else, in the hands of the haughty and educated: it is the people's property, and sometimes all they have.")

Anyone—prescriptivist or descriptivist—looking for good new books on usage cannot improve on the combination of Copperud's *American Usage and Style: The Consensus* and Pythian's *Concise Dictionary of Correct English*, which belong on the shelf with *Modern English Usage* and *The Elements of Style.* Copperud has forged the most comprehensive, sane, and useful book on style since Fowler. The cream of the jest is that he is a journalist. Pythian is usually a shade more incisive but is far more selective. Copperud is especially good in deflating the pretentiousness and indirection of the academy. His entry on the somewhat-rather syndrome is representative:

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"*Rather, somewhat, slightly, pretty*, etc. and a strong descriptive tend to cancel each other." Is being somewhat dead to remain among the quick?

The typical academic has little notion of what Tom Sawyer meant when he advocated throwing in a little style, and that is one reason why academic prose is in the last stages of morbidity. The loose participle and the vague antecedent are de rigueur, as are hoked-up phrases to replace strong verbs, obfusc strings of unhyphenated nouns, foolishly hyperbolic language (such as *insightful* and *massive*), passive contructions, weasel words, pointless conjunctions, and various other habits which are simple-minded and laughable. But hardly anyone is laughing because solemnity is the order of the day. The language of the academy, unlike C.B. talk, underworld cant, mechanics' patois, political sloganeering, and even advertising lingo, makes for clipped worn coinage.

Outside the interlocking circles of bureaucracy (in government, business, and the academy) the assault on sound and sense is relatively minor except among the supporters of women's liberation whose activism extends to revolutionizing the language. These dreadnoughts proceed upstream against colloquial and idiomatic usage. Those of us loath to accept *humankind* (and *world community*), *craftsperson*, *s/he*, and other such expressions (can *yeoperson* and *steeplejill* be far behind?) should relish Philip Howard's remarks on *mermaid* (*fishperson*) and enjoy his search for a term to describe "those who are cohabiting without benefit of clergy." He suggests the lovely Middle English word *leman*. Howard is no sexist, as he shows in "Styles of Address," making fun of both Esq. and Ms. Partridge's "Familiar Terms of Address" (1931), which presents the opposite side of the coin, confirms what Howard says fifty years later: terms of address are dying, and society is the poorer for it. ("Gentlemen, start your engines.")

One woman's jargon is another's poison, just as some vulgar language easily passes muster while other four-letter words, no more offensive, do not. Often it is merely a question of whose linguistic ox and whose standard of decorum are being gored. *Ass* (the beast's burden, not the beast of burden) now seems almost universally accepted. John Ciardi, whose *Browser's Dictionary* is a constant source of delight to any philologist but the dour purist, defines *assbackwards* (and its variant *bassackwards*) as *messed up* or *askew*. He wryly comments that backwards is "the only logical alignment for an ass. . . . But in vulgar exuberance, sweet style is always more than reason." Ciardi does not include *piss windward*, the incorrigible who does everything assbackwards. Some of the most enjoyable entries in Ciardi's dictionary are *B.V.D.'s*, *cocktail*, *Dutch*, *fiddle*, *fornicate*, *galleywest*, *mad*, *mare's nest*, *McCoy* (the subject of a good article by Partridge), *name*, *pants*, *queen*, *salt*, *shifferrobe*, *testify*, and *Yankee*.

Most dictionaries, even the OED, are of little help when you seek the origin and meaning of idiomatic and colloquial expressions. Here are some that I have sought without success in these and other dictionaries, including Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang*: *hens' teeth*, *making book*, *putting on the dog*, *shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations*, and *keep your tail over the*

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dashboard. A few years ago a respectable scholar wrote in a respectable journal that the family of Colonel William Byrd had gone from shirttails to shirttails in three generations. This comical lapse was caused by a defective sense of idiom and punctilio. This poor chap may be in the market for hens' teeth and elbow grease.

Keep your tail over the dashboard is Sadie Burke's signature. In *All the King's Men* Warren uses this leitmotiv to reveal her character as a tough-minded and apparently hardhearted dame. Much would have been lost if he had had her say *Keep your nose to the grindstone*, a related idiom which suggests endless drudgery, not a lively and spirited pace, and which lacks the necessary saltiness and freshness. We need an American Partridge to record such expressions.

The twist of idiom carries inertial force, a force that can quickly throw the unwary user of language. Any of us can establish the exact meaning of a word by consulting these dictionaries and can see how that word should be used by conning these handbooks, but we can discover the metaphoric potency of language only by studying its masters, as can be done superficially by repairing to a book of quotations and checking the particular catchword. No longer is the king over the water toasted by his would-be subjects, but the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* records the usage, as it does the king of shreds and patches and other kings great and small. The careful writer may consult not only this book but Bartlett, but he will avoid letting his style be marked by the commonplace urge, a pedantic habit. The reader, as Horace insisted, wants to be delighted as well as instructed. Bartlett's heirs provide a fuller measure of delight than their rival editors at the Oxford press. On the same page we get Durocher's "Nice guys finish last" and Satchel Paige's "Don't look back. Something may be gaining on you."

The way to approach reference books, especially general books like Safire's or Howard's and handbooks on style, is cautiously, the way we handle the language itself. We don't swallow such tomes whole unless we want to talk and write like Mrs. Southworth's redoubtable heroines (who were laid only by unexpected twists in the language). No word-handler or word-monger is perfect, even White, the coiner of these phrases. We remain alert to life's possibilities largely by remaining sensitive to the nuances of language ("To change your language you must change your life"—Derek Walcott), and we should always bear in mind White's injunction that language is fluid and "the servant of whim and fancy." Randall Jarrell expostulated "Read at whim!" We can do worse than whimsically ramble through Ciardi and Barnhart; Copperud, Howard, and Pythian; *Bartlett's* and the *Oxford Book of Quotations.* During our rambles we might ponder the aphorism that language is like a woman who responds fully to her lover only after being handled with a little judicious violence.

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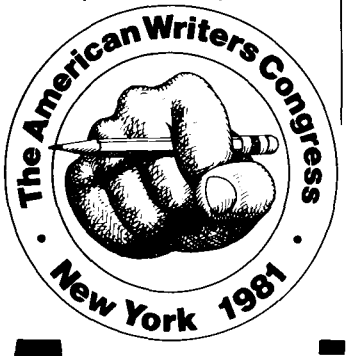

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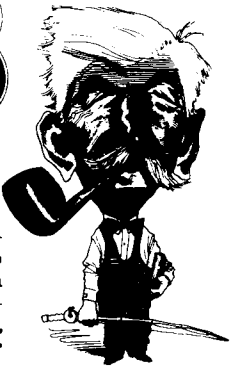

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